Reflections by ksl

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Tony sighed softly, settling himself into his couch, relieved to finally be warm and dry. He set his stocking feet on the coffee table, stretching out his legs. He’d tossed the prescription for painkillers the Doctor at the clinic had insisted on giving him, opting to deal with the pain in his wrist, shoulder and chest in a more traditional fashion—an ice pack and a well aged single malt scotch.

Tony sipped the amber liquid, enjoying the smooth smoky flavor. The faint burn felt good on his abused throat. He sighed again, settling the gelled ice pack onto his sprained right wrist. He was glad the x-rays had revealed it wasn’t broken. Wearing a heavy cast for six weeks was not his idea of a good time. And the muscle pull in his shoulder meant it would hurt for a bit, but was fine in a few days. No need for a sling or anything else. He’d stopped coughing several hours ago and he hoped that meant by tomorrow his chest wouldn’t hurt any more.

Breathing for himself had been hard enough to do after the shock of leaping, not once but twice, into bone chilling water. Having to breathe for another had been exhausting. Tony was absently grateful he’d upped the number of miles he ran every day and added weight training to his routine. It was the only way he could have had enough air, strength and stamina to break out a window, forcibly remove the steering wheel, and pull Maddie Tyler and Gibbs from the submerged car. Not to mention doing CPR on both until they were breathing on their own.

His lips curled into a bitter smile. Of course all that exercise hadn’t really been undertaken with a situation like this in mind. It was more a way to pass time that had once been spent with the lovely Dr. Jeanne Benoit. It was a way to keep himself busy, trying not to think about how little respect, concern or consideration he’d gotten from his team in recent months…Gibbs in particular.

His car was blown up, and he’d been presumed dead for several hours, but not one teammate had welcomed him back or expressed any relief he was still alive—at least not to him. They may have commiserated while he was dealing with René and Jeanne, but all Tony saw was them making short work of raiding his desk, stealing his personal possessions. That would have been okay if Tony thought they’d taken something to remember him by. But they’d taken things they’d envied, not things representative of him. McGee had taken his American Pie coffee mug. Ziva had gotten his letter opener. And Ducky had walked off with his Mighty Mouse stapler.

Tony’s shook his head. Kate’s desk had sat untouched for weeks, a shrine to her. Gibbs had defended her place, only giving way when Ziva and the Director forced the issue. Wen it came to Tony…Gibbs clearly didn’t hold him in the same regard. His teammates had picked his desk clean before his ‘body’ was even in the ground. And it was a safe bet Gibbs would have had a replacement settled in to Tony’s desk in less than a week.

It wasn’t that he expected Gibbs to be broken up over his demise. Not really. Gibbs’ reaction to the death of a colleague had always been to find the bastard who’d killed them and take him or her down. Gibbs had obviously given Tony the same consideration because he and the team clearly had been working the case. But somehow that wasn’t as reassuring as Tony thought it would be. It was what they would have done for anyone. It was the least they could do for him.
Tony nodded to himself, sipping his drink again. That was the problem. They hadn’t gone above and beyond the call for him. Not that they really had to because he hadn’t been killed. He wasn’t truly dead, but part of him wondered if they would have if he’d really died in that explosion. Would Abby have played a dirge in her lab? Would McGee have talked to his corpse like he had Kate’s? Would Gibbs morph into ‘pod Gibbs’ again and been nice to everyone? Would Ziva have been remotely at a loss for words for even a few moments? Would Ducky have waxed poetic about him?

Tony’s grip on his glass tightened. Hell, I didn’t even get a fucking thank you for saving Gibbs’ life, Tony thought bitterly. Gibbs hadn’t even looked at him on that damn dock. Those piercing blue eyes had stayed trained on Maddie the entire time. And the rest of his teammates hadn’t seemed terribly grateful either for his efforts to save their boss. Given how they’d pined away for Gibbs when the man was in Mexico for four months some show of gratitude wouldn’t have been remiss.

Tony sighed heavily. Gibbs had given him a ration of shit for lying to him…in that quiet, understated way that always made Tony feel all of two inches tall….but the former Marine obviously thought nothing of going off on his own and nearly dying. Evidently it was okay for him to leave his team out of the loop, but not be left out. Tony grimaced. He hated double standards.

“The fucking hypocrite,” he muttered. He winced reflexively. He’d never honestly criticized Gibbs before. It felt weird, and was oddly liberating.

And if this had been the only thing Tony would never have even considered judging his boss now. Gibbs was certainly entitled to hold the memory of his daughter sacred, to have the chance to protect Kelly’s childhood friend the way he hadn’t been able to protect his daughter. But this was far from the only time when Gibbs had kept Tony out of the loop. The man made a regular habit of it, doing it whenever he saw the need and never explaining why. And it was definitely not the only time Tony’s teammates words and actions made him doubt his choice to not take the job in Spain, to rethink his decision not chase after Jeanne.

Tony shook his head. There was the missing baby case. He knew his teammates had gotten off on making him call everyone of the dead con woman’s marks; they’d obviously gotten some sort of satisfaction out of his trying to justify and explain her lying to so many men. Tony hadn’t been immune to the irony.

Gibbs had no doubt assigned him the task as a punishment. He was under orders to keep his team in the dark about the La Grenouille. Gibbs hadn’t even been in the States when the whole thing started. But clearly Gibbs saying he understood and his actually understanding were not the same thing. Tony snarled silently, angry at the injustice of it. Hell, he wasn’t even trusted enough now to just step out for a damn dentist appointment.

And his being right about Michael Arnett’s wife didn’t warrant any recognition of skill or ability. No, that all fell to Abby. Natch. There were days when Tony really hated her for being Gibbs’ favorite. All Tony in the way of attention ever got was a head smack for spreading rumors.

Tony closed his eyes, flinching at the memory. It would have been nice if McGee and Ziva had gotten similar smacks. They’d done their own share of gossip spreading. Of course, Gibbs ignored that. Truly hard head smacks were obviously reserved for Tony. Fair play at NCIS was evidently something that only occurred in fairy tales.

It hadn’t mattered that Tony was able to explain Gibbs’ gut feeling their delivery boy was really their ‘Eraser’ either. It was so easy to dismiss his insight because it was courtesy of a movie. The same way they’d dismissed his figuring out how to get Gibbs and a dozen teenage hostages out of a classroom.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Like McGee or Ziva had any inspiration to lay claim to.”
He took another sip of his drink. The real crowning moment though, what had him rethinking his place on
the team had happened out to sea on a ghost ship. There was nothing like being told that if he was dying, it
would be okay with Gibbs as long as he did it quietly. Maybe he had overreacted on the Chimera, but then
Tony thought he had every right to be a little twitchy. He’d nearly died of the fucking plague. He’d almost
been blown up…several times. He’d been kidnapped. Drugged. Shot at. Pushed out of plane. Chained to a
cold blooded murderer. Nearly been run over and almost fell several stories to an unforgiving concrete
floor. Even cats only got nine lives. How long was he to assume his luck would hold out? Even his life
insurance salesman was rethinking what sort of policy Tony should have.

Tony set his now empty glass on the end table, eyes staring blankly at nothing. He’d sat on that pier---the
hero of the hour---soaking wet and shivering, watching Gibbs and Maddie breathing, chests rising in falling
in sync. He should have felt elated, relieved, grateful…anything. But mostly what he felt was cold and
tired.

It was only after the paramedics had shown up he was aware of how much his wrist and shoulder hurt.
Everything it had taken to save Gibbs and Maddie had cost him. His sprained wrist, strained shoulder, and
sore chest and throat were testament to that.

He hadn’t gone to the hospital with them. Even knowing he was hurt Tony hadn’t been willing to ride in
the ambulance. No, he had stayed behind and secured the scene. He’d done his damn job because that was
what Gibbs would have expected, it was what Tony expected of himself. No matter what happened, he did
his job.

And it wasn’t like anyone asked him if he was okay. All the attention had been focused on Gibbs and
Maddie. Which, given how close they’d come to dying, Tony didn’t honestly begrudge them. But it would
have been nice if Ziva, McGee, Ducky or even Palmer had bothered to give him a second glance. If they’d
done more than comment on his dripping all over the crime scene, he might have admitted to just how much
he hurt. But they didn’t, and he hadn’t. And that was that.

Tony had left the scene when everything was wrapped up. He drove himself to a local clinic near his
apartment rather than go to the closest hospital where Gibbs and Maddie had been taken. It was ironically
the same hospital Jeanne used to work at. Better to avoid running into her coworkers. They all knew him as
Tony DiNardo. And god only knew what Jeanne might have told them about him and the real reason he
was dating her. He didn’t want to have to deal with pissed off colleagues of hers who were upset with him
for breaking her heart. It wasn’t like she was the only one who’d gotten hurt. He really had loved her.
Whether anyone else believed that or not.

Tony picked up his cellphone. He dialed the hospital’s number, smiling wryly at his still having the number
memorized. Getting an update on Gibbs and Maddie over the phone was preferable to going in person.

He was sure Jenny would be there, all doe-eyed and concerned about Gibbs. Tony rolled his eyes. He
hoped like hell he never had to work for or with a former lover if that was how they all reacted. Sex kitten
one minute, bitch the next. Maybe it was just Jenny, but Tony would rather never find out for sure.

And if she wasn’t there, it would be Abby. Tony loved her like a sister, but there were times when her
absolute faith in Gibbs grated on his nerves. Every time he’d seen Gibbs’ picture on her monitor when the
man had been in Mexico, Tony had wanted to scream, “He left us!! Don’t you get it! We weren’t enough
for the selfish son of a bitch!! We never were, and we never will be!! Your hero has feet of clay. Get over
it!!” He never did, of course, in some ways because Tony wasn’t sure if it was Abby he’d be yelling that at
or himself. Right now, he just didn’t want to risk having to see her tear streaked face, knowing she probably
hadn’t even shed one for him.
He didn’t want to deal with Ziva or McGee either. They were no doubt pissed he’d sent them to follow one lead while he took care of another. He didn’t want to deal with their anger or annoyance or whatever the hell they might be feeling. He’d done his best as acting team leader and he did his best this time too. If that wasn’t enough for them, that was just too damn bad.

The front desk told him what he wanted to know. Both patients were doing fine. They’d be released in the morning...or rather later today. The LED on his DVD player told him it was two in the morning. He hadn’t noticed how late, or really how early it was.

It was definitely time for him to go to bed. Tony rose stiffly to his feet, groaning as muscles protested. He should never have sat down.

As he carried his glass and melting ice pack to the kitchen, Tony noticed a letter on the counter. He’d gotten it a few days ago and hadn’t had time to read it. He smiled, his first genuine one since Maddie Tyler had shown up at the office almost two days ago.

His cousin, Joseph LaFiamma, was the only family he had who regularly stayed in touch. Their friendship had been forged when Tony was ten and Joe was eight. They’d both recently lost a parent; Tony’s mother and Joe’s father had died within days of one another only a few months before the annual family reunion. It was then that they found a certain understanding and comfort with one another that no one else seemed to be willing or able to provide. They’d bonded over a mutual sense of loss, and from that point on they were best friends.

The distance between Long Island and Chicago was bridged with letters and monthly phone calls. The time between reunions and family holiday gatherings was spent planning what they’d do when they saw one another again.

They were like two peas in a pod. It really didn’t come as a surprise to anyone in their families that they’d both end up following similar paths. Although, most everyone expected Tony to go into business with his father, and Joe was supposed to become an attorney like his father had been before he was killed in a drive by shooting.

Joe’s branch of the family was heavily involved in the Chicago mafia. A fact that made life more than a little difficult for Joe when he decided, like Tony, to become a cop. Ultimately, Joe had been disowned, and forced to leave Chicago to avoid being taken out by a rival family in a mob war that had gotten ugly in a hurry.

The DiNozzos were legitimate business people, but they didn’t mind investing LaFiamma money in their enterprises. Money was their common bond—more so than blood—they didn’t care how it was made or where it came from. All that mattered to them was how to acquire more wealth and power along the way. To Tony, even at a young age, it seemed like most of his family only saw each other as a stepping stone to bigger and better.

For Tony and Joe, their relationship was never about business, networking or money. The only thing they’d wanted from each other was someone to share things with, to enjoy life with. They were more like brothers than cousins.

When Tony was officially but quietly disinherited at the age of twelve, most of his extended family simply acted as he’d never been born. They rightly saw his father’s action as more than a temporary discipline measure and more of a prelude to his being permanently disowned.

Joe’s reaction had been anything but a cold shoulder. Rather than shut him out, Joe sent Tony a portion of his allowance every week, despite Tony telling him it wasn’t necessary. When sending it back just meant
Joe would send more the following week, Tony gave up and put the money in his piggy bank for safe keeping. It came in handy later when he was shipped off to military school at fifteen. He used the savings to sneak in calls to Joe whenever he felt sad or lonely. It had never even occurred to Tony to call home at those times. His father was rarely at the house, and when he was there he wasn’t sober. Most of Tony’s many step-mothers didn’t even know who he was much less why he’d be calling. It would have been a waste of time and money to bother anyone other than Joe.

Later when Joe had dropped out of law school rather than become a mouthpiece for his uncle Mikey’s organization that everyone in the family assumed he would be, Tony had put him up in his place in Peoria. He gave Joe a safe harbor until he could figure out how to tell his mother he’d quit school. Tony wasn’t sure if his own burgeoning career in law enforcement had swayed Joe, or if his cousin had already considered it an option before he’d come to stay with Tony. Either way, the rough road they’d opted to take, so contrary to their families’ expectations and demands, was made easier by their mutual support of one another.

Tony reached for the letter. He opened it and smiled reading about Joe’s life in Houston. His cousin had been there as long as Tony had been at NCIS. He had hated it initially, but over time Joe had settled into what was the sort of good life Tony had always hoped his best friend would attain. His letter was filled with good humor and genuine enthusiasm for life. There was so much simple and yet profound joy in Joe’s comments. Even has he griped about the job, the heat and humidity, the crazy drivers and the lack of culture, it was obvious Joe was happy.

Tony sighed softly, rubbing at his tired eyes. His letters back to Joe hadn’t been that upbeat in more than a year. Maybe he needed a change. Something new and different.

Tony reread the letter. It wasn’t hard to figure out that a lot of the happiness in it was directly related to an upcoming four year anniversary. Joe and Levon Lundy had been together as partners for longer than that, but hadn’t become lovers until two years after they’d started working together.

Tony had known for years that Joe played for both teams so his forming a long term relationship with a man hadn’t come as a surprise. Tony was actually the first person Joe had come out to. At eighteen, finding out Joe was bisexual had rocked Tony’s world for a bit, but Joe was still the same kid he’d always known. He wasn’t going to lose his best friend by being stupid. They’d been through too much to let that one little detail change much. And Tony wasn’t completely sure of his own sexuality at the time. He wasn’t going to cast any stones, and he made sure Joe knew that. They’d just taken their respective revelations in stride, and come to terms with adding one more quirk to the growing list of why they were never going to be what most people considered ‘normal’.

The only thing Tony had ever cautioned his cousin about was being sure to be careful. Not just about having protected sex, that was definitely a big one, but far from the only issue. Not everyone was so accepting of an alternative life style. The last thing he wanted was for Joe to get the shit beaten out of him for being different. Tony had already had a small taste of that, and he preferred Joe never had to find out first hand how intolerant people could be.

When Joe told Tony he was in love his partner, Tony had been terrified Levon wouldn’t take it well if he found out. The man was a walking cliché…a Texas cowboy. Levon’s grandfather had been a Texas Ranger. His father had been a wildcatter working on drill rigs for years. He’d grown up attending rodeos and playing football. Levon had gone to college on a sports scholarship and married his high school sweetheart, Caroline. She’d been murdered six years later in a car bomb meant to kill Levon. Her death had been a devastating blow, one that had initially worried Tony when Joe had started working with Levon.

Joe’s initial reports about his partner hadn’t been entirely complimentary. The man had definitely lost his
spark and drive when it came to police work. He was less inclined to push, didn’t seem willing to take any chances and Tony was worried Levon might not be willing to back Joe’s play if he stepped out too far on a limb. But working with Joe, and the challenge he consistently presented, was obviously something Levon had needed to get back to the land of the living. And he was a stabilizing influence in Joe’s life; Levon grounded Joe when being completely cut off from a family he’d loved deeply might have broken him.

Joe hadn’t given Tony all the details on how he and Levon ultimately went from being partners and friends to lovers, but it was obvious they were good for one another. Their relationship was rock solid, enduring everything from adjusting to living together to nearly dying once or twice.

Tony liked Levon a lot. He was easy to relate to and generally accepting nature made him easy to get along with. It didn’t hurt that they had a bit in common. A mother who died when they were young and being raised by an alcoholic father was just the beginning. They had both gone to college on athletic scholarships and had both missed out on a professional career due to injury. They both had been inspired to enter careers in law enforcement by people they’d held in high esteem. And they both had better than average eyesight, hearing and sense of smell.

Tony smiled as he got to the end of Joe’s letter. Included in Levon’s astonishingly elegant handwriting was a brief note inviting him to visit whenever he got the chance. It was an open invitation that Levon never failed to include.

Tony frowned, thinking about how long it had been since he’d seen Joe and Levon. Too damn long he decided. He nodded to himself. The Director had given the team the next few days off. It wasn’t like he even had to take any vacation time. Not that it would have mattered if he had to use up some leave. He hadn’t taken a vacation day almost eighteen months—since Gibbs had run off to Mexico. And while he was in Houston, maybe he’d do a little research on job prospects.

He didn’t want to work on a team that seemed to have little respect for him, and cared even less. They hadn’t thought of him as their boss when he was in charge and they obviously didn’t think much of him now. And he didn’t want to answer to a boss who had a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ mentality. His innate sense of right and wrong could only tolerate so much hypocrisy.

Tony might be willing to bend a few rules now and again for the greater good, but he’d never actually broken them. He was one of the good guys, damn it. He wasn’t the sort to use a sniper rifle to even a score, or tamper with evidence in an ongoing investigation. While he couldn’t prove Gibbs had actually done those things, he was certain enough that he had to make Tony feel a bit uneasy whenever he stopped to think about it. And if Mike Franks was Gibbs’ roll model…it made sense that he would see nothing wrong with crossing those lines. Franks clearly was the sort who would beat someone down in an interrogation room, shoot an unarmed suspect, and saw nothing wrong with letting justice take a back seat to vengeance.

And he definitely didn’t want to find himself working for the Director on another unsanctioned undercover operation. Being used for what amounted to a personal vendetta disguised as a patriotic endeavor left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Tony neatly folded the letter, putting it back in the envelope. He’d call Joe and Levon in a few hours—after he got some sleep and about the time they usually started their day. By then he should have his flight booked. Getting a flight on short notice might be expensive, but Tony figured he could write it off as an investment in his future. It would be money well spent.
More out of habit than any real need, Tony turned his cell phone back on as his plane taxied into the gate at Houston's Hobby International Airport. Glancing at the display, he was genuinely surprised to see one missed call. Joe and Levon knew when his plane was due to arrive, so it wasn't like they need to call and confirm. But it was possible they'd called to let him know they were running late or had gotten pulled in on a case. Tony could easily rent a car or catch a cab if need be.

He arched an eyebrow when the caller ID showed Ducky's name and number. It couldn't be about Gibbs or Maddie. Tony had called the hospital before boarding his plane just after two PM. They'd already been released.

Tony checked the message. He smiled reflexively at the stewardess as he stepped off the plane, phone to his ear, towing his carry on behind him.

"Anthony…I must apologize. I was so wrapped up in Jethro's near demise, I never thought to inquire as to your state of health. Leaping into that water, far from pristine I'm sure, not to mention decidedly chilly, was risky for anyone. More so for someone who has survived the plague. As a doctor, albeit one who works predominantly with the dead, it was decidedly unprofessional of me to neglect you."

Tony snorted delicately. Unprofessional? When had their relationship ever been strictly professional?

"Professional consideration aside, it was certainly inexcusable not to ask after the well being of a friend. I really am sorry about that, my dear boy."

Tony smiled. Ducky really was a good guy. A little long winded at times, but definitely one of the nicer people Tony had worked with.

His smile faded at Ducky's next statement. "I'd expected to see you at the hospital."

Tony wasn't sure if there was censure in the older man's voice or not. Voice mail tended to gloss over the sort of nuances that could be heard in person or face to face. So it could have been concern, but Tony was fairly confident Ducky had meant the statement as some sort of chastise.

Tony scowled. Was he supposed to be there? He'd already done all he could do for Gibbs and Maddie at the dock. And they'd only been admitted for one night. With everyone else there, Tony seriously doubted anyone other than Ducky even noticed his absence.

Any time Tony had been recovering from injury or illness, after the initial concern, Gibbs had never stopped by to check on him. Why the hell should he be expected to do more than Gibbs would have done in his place? They all thought Gibbs walked on water, so doing what Gibbs would do should be good enough to satisfy them.

If Ducky hadn't expected him to check on Gibbs, then what else could it have been? He wasn't concerned for Tony's well being at the scene. Although mildly hurt from his actions, Tony had been very careful not to show any sign of injury. By the time Ducky had placed his call nearly 24 hours had elapsed. If Tony had been seriously injured or gotten sick Ducky's concern would have been too little, too late.

"Please call when you get my message. I would be relieved to hear that you are indeed all right."

Tony rolled his eyes, and pushed the button to delete the message. As he walked through the airport he debated whether or not to return Ducky's call. If he didn't call, would Ducky up the ante and do more than just call again? Would he swing by his place to check on Tony personally? He might, but Tony doubted
Ducky would go that far. Still….it was better to head the ME off at the pass than have him get Ziva or McGee to break in to Tony's apartment out of misplaced concern.

Tony decided on a quick text message. It would meet the spirit of the older man's request, and let him know Tony was just fine, without having to deal with any other questions Ducky might ask. He certainly didn't intend to tell Ducky where he was or why. And he wasn't going to explain why he wasn't at the hospital to hold everyone's hand.

Tony grimaced. Not one of them had looked to him for security or reassurance before. There was no reason for them to do so now. They had Gibbs for that.

Tony turned off his phone, determined to ignore it until he was back in D.C. He had three days, and the only thing he wanted to seriously think about was whether or not he was staying at NCIS. Maybe he wouldn't go back at all. A mover could pack his things easily enough. It was how he'd gotten his possessions from Baltimore in the first place. Gibbs hadn't given him more than a day to report for duty. He'd spent his first month at NCIS living out of a low budget motel until he could find a place to live and get his stuff delivered.

Tony made it to baggage claim, and started looking for Joe and Levon. Spotting Joe was rarely hard to do. Like Tony, he was above average in height, standing four and a half inches over six feet. His hair dark black hair and olive complexion were offset by a pair of turquoise blue eyes. He worked out regularly, and it gave him a sculpted physique that bespoke of strength and endurance without looking bulky. And also like Tony, Joe tended to favor expensive, designer clothing. All in all, Joe looked more like a male model than a cop.

Levon was only an inch or so shorter than Joe, but since he normally wore cowboy boots it wasn't immediately noticeable. His curly blond hair was usually hidden under a white Stetson. Contrary to the typical clean cut 'cowboy' persona, Levon usually let his hair grow long enough to touch his shoulders. His eyes were a striking shade of brown that reminded Tony of the Cognac his father liked to serve to important clients. He was lanky and lean, his form suggesting more wiry strength and flexibility than raw power. Blue jeans and a button down shirt were practically a uniform for Levon. Tony couldn't remember ever seeing him in anything else.

Hearing his name called out, Tony turned and grinned. "Joey!" In a few quick, long legged strides they closed the distance. Joe wrapped Tony in a fierce hug that bordered on being painful. Tony basked in the warmth and affection being so freely offered, even as he struggled to catch his breath. He'd missed this. Missed Joey.

"Might want ta ease up a bit there, Joe," Levon's soft drawl came from Tony's left, amusement coloring his voice. "Gonna crack a few ribs on the kid if you aren't careful."

Tony couldn't help laughing at being called a kid. He was two years older than Joe and only a year younger than Levon. It hardly made him a child.

"Damn, it is good to see you."

Tony stepped back, but didn't entirely release his hold on Tony. His grin was bright and joyful. "Damn, it is good to see you."

Tony couldn't help but grin back. "Good to see you too."

"Told you I could find him."

Levon shrugged one shoulder. "Still say it would have been faster to do it my way."

Levon's solution to finding people in a crowded airport was to simply have them paged. While Tony gave
him points for efficiency, it wasn't exactly a subtle way to track someone down. But he understood Levon’s aversion to crowds and a desire not to be forced to wade into the middle of a herd of humanity if he didn’t have to.

"Cowboy," Tony greeted Levon, using the same nickname Joe often used, heading off what he knew was a familiar argument between the two. It no longer had any heat to it, but like a lot of long term couples they liked to rehash it now and again.

He held out his hand. The blond wasn't quite as physical in his displays of affection, at least when it came to anyone other than Joe, so Tony didn't try to hug him the way he had Joe. Instead of a traditional handshake, he gripped Tony's forearm and pulled him in for a quick chest bump and a light pat on the shoulder.

"Good ta see ya, Slick."

Levon had dubbed Tony `slick' not long after they first met. Tony still wasn't sure if it was in reference to his being a smooth operator or just his being a `city slicker'. Either way, he found he didn't mind the name. It was hard to object to something that so clearly marked him `family' to Levon.

Levon gave him an assessing look; sharp eyes measuring Tony in a way that made him fight the urge to fidget. It didn't make him feel any better when Joe and Levon traded looks, silently communicating something. He had a sneaking suspicion that all the stress of the last few months was easy to see for anyone who cared to look. Joe and Levon were the sort who would notice and worry about him. He knew there would be questions, and a lot of them---his paying an exorbitant price for the first available flight to Houston practically guaranteed they'd want to know what was wrong---he just wasn't prepared to have to start so early into his trip.

"Relax, Slick, we're not gonna grill ya." Levon smiled gently. "At least not until ya settle in and eat somethin'. Looks like you could stand a good meal," he cocked his head, giving Tony another measuring glance, "or three."

Tony fought down a blush. He knew he'd lost some weight recently, but without a scale at his apartment, he had no idea how much. He certainly hadn't thought it was noticeable because no one else had commented on it. But then none of his coworkers really noticed much about him these days so they weren't exactly a good benchmark for what was obvious and what wasn't.

"It's been a rough couple of months." Tony admitted.

"You said that when you called," Joe reminded him. He casually grabbed Tony's bag, hefting the lightweight carryon with an easy grace of someone used to lifting heavier things on a regular basis.

"I can carry—"

"Sure ya can, but he ain't going to let you." Levon grinned. "And when we get back ta the house, Joe will be trying ta stuff you full of food he's being made since ya called. Assuming, o' course, he don't make you lay down and take a nap first."

Joe glared at Levon. "You make me sound like some sort of mother hen."

"You are a mother hen," Levon rolled his eyes. "No like about it, Boy."

Tony chuckled. He'd always enjoyed their bantering. It reminded him of verbally sparring with Kate, although her commentary often had more bite to it than what passed back and forth between Joe and Levon. And she didn't seem to have any qualms about making comments that hit below the belt.
"How was your flight, Tony?" Joe asked.

"Not bad." The only seats available were first class, so at least he had a little more leg room. He'd even
gotten a light snack during his flight. For what the tickets cost him, he should have gotten a steak dinner, but
as Joe wrapped an arm around his shoulder, Tony wasn't sorry he'd come.

As they stepped outside, Tony wasn't entirely surprised to see Levon's club cab truck parked directly in front
of the doors in an area reserved for immediate pickup. He shot Levon an amused look. "Abusing your
authority?"

"Nope." Levon laughed. "Didn't even tell them we was cops."

"You didn't have to." Joe shook his head. "The security guard on duty knows you. Hell he even said he
owed you one. I swear to god, some days it feels like everyone you know owes you a favor, Cowboy."

"Wasn't like I planned it," Levon shrugged. "I didn't know Denny was working here today." As he stepped
around the truck to the driver's side, Levon raised two fingers going to the brim of his hat in a casual salute
to a security guard who was urging a taxi to move along. The guy returned it with a nod and a smile.

Joe put the carryon in the back seat, leaving the door open for Tony slide in next to it before he got into the
front passenger seat. "You might not have known it would be him, but you knew someone was going to let
you park at the curb."

Levon gave Joe a cocky smile as he put on his sun glasses. "It pays ta be a nice guy."

"I am a nice guy, and I never get treatment like that," Joe retorted. "You just don't want to admit this is some
sort of 'good ol' boy' thing going on."

"You're just sore 'cause I said we wouldn't need to flash our badges ta park here and we didn't." Levon
pointed a finger at Joe. "Which reminds me…you owe me a buck."

"No I don't." Joe laughed. "We never shook in it."

Levon made eye contact in the mirror with Tony. "Slick, I think your cousin is trying to welch on our bet."

"Sounds like you might be right," Tony agreed with a smile. "He was like that when he was little too."

"I was not."

"You still owe me cookies," Tony countered. He didn't truly think Joe still owed him anything, but it was
fun to pull his chain now and again.

"Cookies?" Levon asked, arching an eyebrow.

"When we were kids we used to bet with cookies." Tony shrugged. "Joe always had his mother's dark
chocolate chip to put up." And they were definitely Tony's favorites. No one made them as good as Sofia
LaFiamma.

"I had Rosa's gingersnaps to trade." He wasn't sure if Rosa, his father's housekeeper and cook for nearly
twenty years, ever knew why he asked her to make gingersnaps when they were not his favorite. He had a
suspicion she was aware he was trading them off to Joe since she'd helped him mail packages to his cousin
several times, but she never said a word.
"I don't owe you anything." Joe folded his arms over his chest.

"Christmas," Tony countered smugly, reciting the year and location. "We bet on which one of the family would pass out first."

It was usually after the younger children had been sent to bed that the alcohol flowed like water. But they'd snuck out to watch enough of the late night parties in secret to know just how drunk their relatives could get. Joe had bet on Tony's father, but knowing how much his old man drank on a daily basis, Tony had bet on Joe's Uncle Mario. Mario didn't seem as prone to indulging as the others. And he clearly didn't know how to hold his liquor if his actions later that night had been anything to go by.

"That doesn't count." Joe turned in his seat to face Tony more directly. "Uncle Mario didn't pass out, he was knocked out."

"Knocked out?" Levon asked, both eyebrows rising.

"He got into an argument with Donnie over his latest girlfriend, I think. Donnie took exception to something he said and belted Mario. He went down like a sack of potatoes."

"Glass jaw?"

"Maybe." Joe shrugged, turning in his seat to once more face forward. "More likely it was because Donnie was a golden gloves champion that year. He could throw one hell of a punch."

Tony shook his head, remembering the event. Picking a fight with Donnie clearly hadn't been one of Mario's better decisions.

"He was still the first to hit the floor."

"But it wasn't because he was drunk," Joe tossed over his shoulder.

"Sounds like he'd certainly had enough booze to make him stupid," Levon commented dryly.

"And that should count." Tony reached forward to lightly bump knuckles with Levon. They were definitely in agreement.

Joe waved a hand in dismissal. "Technicality."

"You still owe me cookies." Tony pretended to pout.

"Good thing I already made some then." Joe grinned.

He has his mother's recipe. It was one of the few things of hers he'd gotten when Sofia died. His sister had filched Sofia's cookbook for him and sent it secretly since the rest of the family flatly refused to let him have anything to remember her by when she died. Joe couldn't even go back to Chicago for her funeral. And while Joe loved to cook, regularly making his mother's other favorite dishes, he rarely made the cookies. They were something Joe reserved for special occasions. Tony swallowed hard. It was nice to know his coming to visit qualified as 'special'.

"And it's a good thing I made a double batch." Joe shot Levon a dark look. "Someone ate more than his fair share already."
"Had to give them a quality taste test." Levon smiled. He had a sweet tooth that rivaled Tony's.

"A dozen times?"

"Hey, the first one could o' been some sort of fluke."

"A fluke? Not bloody damn likely." Joe snorted. "You knew they were for Tony."

"Didn't know they were to pay off an old debt though." Levon cast a quick look at Tony. "Ya don't mind me eating yer winnings, do ya, Slick?"

"I don't mind, Cowboy." Tony smiled. He was sure if he had minded, Levon would have found a way to make it up to him. It was just the way Levon was.

"It would take a stronger man than either of us to resist cookies fresh out of the oven."

"True."

"You could just say it was your share of what Joe still owes you."

Levon grinned. "Perfect."

"Now wait a minute," Joe protested, continuing to insist he didn't owe Levon anything.

They bickered back and forth good-naturedly. The topic drifting from cookies and bets to small chores around the house not completed to choices in music and leaving wet towels on the floor. Tony smiled. Four years together should hardly qualify them as 'old married couple' but they certainly acted the part.

Tony sat back, eyes closing as he relaxed, letting their voices wash over him. Getting to the small ranch Levon and Joe jointly owned just outside the city would take at least an hour if not more. Traffic in Houston was never good, and it was particularly bad at this time of day.

Tony sighed, shifting to settle more fully into his leather seat. He realwanted to talk to them...but he couldn't quite muster the energy. He needed a sounding board, people who could be at least some what objective. He wanted to talk about everything that had happened in the past few months, and his options with people who would have his best interest at heart.

At the moment, he didn't feel any pressing need to do anything more than relax and enjoy feeling safe and comfortable. Too many nights with too little rest were catching up with him. Without anything to actively engage him, Tony was hard pressed not to let the warmth of the sun and steady motion of the vehicle lull him to sleep.

He didn't know Levon's earlier joke about forcing him to take a nap hadn't been entirely meant to tease Joe. When they'd seen how tired and hollow-eyed he'd looked in the airport, they had mutely agreed to make sure he got some rest. They expected him to fall asleep, even going so far as to deliberately push the conversation in a direction that didn't require his input and lowering their voices so it would be that much easier for him to doze off. Levon had already planned on taking a longer route home to give Tony more time to nap.

As Tony nodded off, he missed the looks that passed back and forth between Joe and Levon. Whatever the problem was, they had already agreed when he'd first called to tell them he was coming, Tony would not have to deal with it alone.
Ducky hated leaving messages with machines. There was so little time allotted to express himself properly. And judging by Tony’s text message, he obviously failed to truly convey how concerned he was for the younger man’s well being. Admittedly, he was a little late in calling to check on him, but honestly having Gibbs nearly die had been a considerable distraction. It was unnerving to think of how close he’d come to losing the pigheaded fool twice in as many years. An explosion, nearly drowning, he shuddered to think of what would actually kill his friend of more than fifteen years.

Ducky scowled. Clearly Tony had been taking a few lessons from Gibbs when it came to curt communication. A handful of letters that made for words Ducky could barely decipher were hardly the reassurance he’d been looking for. ‘I’m fine’ in any form wasn’t necessarily a valid statement coming from Tony. He had a distressing habit of using variations of that sentence no matter how he gravely injured or sick he might be. Ducky was ready to dial Tony’s number again when it occurred to him that Tony had sent a text rather than call because he obviously didn’t want to talk to him.

Tony had always shown a marked preference in how he communicated with people. Speaking face to face was always his first choice. A video conference was better than just a phone call, and a call was better than e-mail. Texting was used only when no other option was readily available. Or when Tony didn’t genuinely wish to speak to someone but couldn’t entirely ignore them either.

Ducky sighed heavily, closing his phone. There were only two likely reasons Tony would have for wanting to avoid him. Either he was ill or he was angry. Ducky hoped it was the latter. Anger at least could be dealt with in a fairly straightforward manner. Assuming Ducky could get him to listen, to let him explain and apologize properly for not paying more attention or being more attentive. Tony had never been the sort to hold a grudge after all. A little time was all Tony ever seemed to need to sort things out, but talking to him certainly couldn’t hurt.

Illness on the other hand could be far more serious. Like anyone who’d experience lung damaging illnesses, Tony was far more susceptible future lung ailments. Ducky doubted if Gibbs even realized how large a risk Tony had taken to rescue him from his own foolish actions. His old friend could be remarkably near sighted when it came to things like that. Ducky had been sorely tempted to smack Gibbs the way he so often did to Tony, but he doubted it would do any good.

Nodding to himself, Ducky decided it would be best if he bearded the lion in his den. He would go to Tony’s place. He could at least make certain he was in fact as fine as he claimed. And if he was not ill but angry, then he could work on what it would take to fix that.

Ducky briefly considered calling Gibbs. He knew how to pick locks and could readily gain entry to Tony’s home, but he was supposed to be resting, recovering from his own ordeal. And there was little to be gained by worrying Gibbs if there was nothing wrong. Not to mention the fact that breaking into Tony’s home wouldn’t help the situation any. No man liked having the main defense of his personal sanctuary breached with so little effort.

Ducky drove Tony’s apartment building. It was a nice enough neighborhood but the building’s owner wasn’t the best when it came to maintenance. Over the years there had been a number of problems. Most were minor, but the boiler blowing up and cutting off heat and power to the building would have been enough to make Ducky consider moving out. He never understood why Tony hadn’t.

Ducky parked his Morgan. He caught himself looking for Tony’s Mustang in the lot before he remembered the car had been destroyed. He felt his cheeks warm as he realized he had no idea how Tony was getting to work these days.
He didn’t think anyone had ever asked Tony what he’d gotten to replace the destroyed classic or if he’d gotten anything at all. For all they knew he could have been taking the bus to work. Ducky shook his head. Tony would have asked someone from the team for a ride rather than be subjected to what he’d dubbed the ‘loser cruiser’. Wouldn’t he?

Ducky honestly wasn’t certain. Things between the team had been strained. Too many secrets and so many harsh words were bound to cause rifts. Ducky bit his lower lip, worried that the team’s cohesion might not be as sound as he’d been assuming it to be.

Ducky squared his shoulders. If that were the case, then coming to Tony was a sound decision. Such things could not be fixed from a distance.

In the building, Ducky made his way up the stairs to Tony’s third floor walk up. He would have thought an elevator would have been a key requirement for Tony, but then he was young and athletic enough that the exercise likely didn’t faze him as much as it did Ducky.

Ducky knocked on Tony’s door. He waited patiently. It was possible Tony was napping. The younger man had looked a bit frazzled of late; even more so than he had when working undercover in addition to his regular duties. It really wasn’t that long ago Tony had been pulling double duty. Working twenty four hours a day seven days a week was bound to catch up with him eventually. And it wasn’t as though things had gotten easier with the disappearance of the Rene Benoit and his daughter. If anything, the way they’d left, and the fallout afterward had simply made things worse.

He sighed and knocked again. He smiled politely as very petite young woman walked past him, heading down the hall. For a moment her diminutive stature had caused Ducky to almost mistake her for a child. But her obvious curves made it clear she was no prepubescent teenager. She was simply tiny. Ducky smiled thinking her short blond locks styled in what he heard referred to as a ‘pixie cut’ only added to the elf like impression her size created.

“Excuse…you look for Tony, yes?” She asked, her tone hesitant. Her accent and improper grammar made it clear English was not her first language. She was probably eastern European by Ducky’s estimation and based on her body language somewhat shy by nature.

“Yes, I am.” Ducky smiled warmly at her. Unlike the rest of Tony’s teammates, Ducky knew he was usually perceived as harmless by most, but given that he felt huge compared to this small woman, it didn’t hurt to try and appear even more non-threatening.

“He’s not home.” She smiled timidly, brown eyes flickering to meet blue before dancing away.

“You wouldn’t happen to know when he might be returning, would you?”

“Not for days.” She sounded apologetic, clearly sorry she couldn’t give him a better answer. “He said he has time off and going out of town.”

“Ah.” Ducky nodded. “A little rest and relaxation.”

That was another possible reason for the text message. He might have had limited service wherever he’d gone, or no where to plug in the phone to recharge the battery and so was making sparing use of it. Ducky hoped that’s all there was to it. His attention was drawn back to the woman as she spoke again.

“I think Tony really need that.” She opined, expression earnest, her brow furrowed. “Rest and relaxation, yes, that he need. He not like himself for long time.”
“Oh?”

“He normally has smile for everyone. Very friendly. Time to talk and help me with my English. But lately, not so much.” She looked at Tony’s door. “He runs a lot now.”

“Runs a lot?” Ducky frowned, trying to see the significance in her statement. He knew Tony jogged. Most agents did some sort of regular exercise to maintain at least a standard level of fitness.

“Miles and miles.” She sighed. “I see him go in morning. Again at night. I think…he is not working his legs. He work out his demons.” Her face flushed, as though she suddenly realized she’d said too much. “I’m sorry. I go now.”

Ducky was tempted to call her back and explain what she meant, but he had a feeling that short of a Gibbs’ style interrogation he likely wouldn’t get more out of her. And the poor girl hadn’t done anything to be subjected to that sort of treatment.

Ducky grimaced, giving Tony’s door a hard look. He could try calling again, but doubted it would be any more effective than his last attempt. At least he knew the younger man was healthy enough to leave town, even Tony wasn’t so foolish as to make a trip when he wasn’t feeling well. He was a bit disappointed Tony hadn’t mentioned leaving, but then he could understand the younger man feeling the need to have some uninterrupted time to himself. Dealing with his mother and the demands of his job often made Ducky think running away, even for a short time, would be wonderful.

Ducky headed back down the stairs. He would simply have to wait until Tony returned to talk to him. Not the best alternative but certainly not the worst. He’d just have to arrange time on Monday to set things right. That was certainly doable.

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Abby had tried to get McGee to help her work on a ‘thank you’ present for Tony. He’d saved the Bossman’s life so he was totally deserving of some sort of recognition. And if McGee had argued to the contrary she’d have belted him one, but he’d just put her off saying he was busy at some stupid book signing.

His agent thought some more publicity was needed for Thom E. Gemcity’s new book due to be released in another week. It had taken him several months longer than planned to actually finish it, but it was finally done. While Abby was happy for McGee to have his moment in the spotlight, she was still disappointed that he wasn’t available to help her.

She made a face at her own reflection in the store window. Signing her name and making nice with strangers wasn’t her idea of a good time. It seemed like a crappy way to spend a few days off.

She sighed moving on to the next store. Abby needed to find the right gift. It had to be something awesome. Tony had risked his life to save Gibbs. She couldn’t just get him anything.

She’d considered asking Ziva, but dismissed the idea. She didn’t think the other woman would be willing to visit as many stores as necessary to find the perfect thing. Ziva just didn’t seem the sort who would want to put in that level of effort. Not that McGee would willingly have done it either, but Abby could browbeat or blackmail him into it. And then make it up to him with a nice meal, or new computer game, or something.

Abby browsed though yet another display of things that were just mediocre. She could get Tony black roses….she had before, but belatedly realized they were more her thing than his. It wasn’t right to give someone a gift they didn’t really want or entirely like.
She didn’t want to get him another DVD. Tony’s collection was huge and he already owned all his favorites. A movie poster might be okay...if it was vintage and good quality, but she didn’t think she could find something like that on short notice.

She’d considered a toy Ferrari before passing on it. Tony might think it was silly. She knew he’d much rather have the real thing. Hell, she’d rather have the real thing, but it wasn’t an option on her budget.

Abby eyed the plush toys, petting a few as she walked down the aisle. Tony liked Bert okay, but she didn’t think he’d care for a toy of his own. She wrinkled her nose at the idea of giving him a teddy bear. They were so ordinary. Maybe if she dyed the fur and added a studded collar...nah, still totally the wrong thing.

She sighed. Maybe no toy at all would work. She headed outside and worked her way further up the street. She stopped at a high end clothing store, looking into the window. A silk tie to replace the pretty one that had been ruined was a possibility but it didn’t seem like enough. A tie was hardly a gift that implied ‘hero’.

She grimaced, disappointed in herself. Tony would know exactly what would be the right thing, but she couldn’t really ask him. It would ruin the surprise for one thing...and for another, he wasn’t answering his phone.

She was a bit worried that he hadn’t picked up when she called. He hadn’t come to the hospital, which at the time Abby hadn’t even noticed. She was too distraught over Gibbs nearly dying to notice much of anything. But she had wanted to thank him, and tell him what a good job he’d done once she calmed down.

She pursed her lips, considering why he might not have picked up. Maybe he was busy. He did have a life outside the office...or so he said. Some days Abby wasn’t so sure. Even if he was telling the truth, Gibbs’ rules said to always be reachable, and so far Tony had always followed that rule. He was a bit lax on the others, but never messed up that one.

And Tony always took her calls. That wasn’t true of everyone. He had ignored Ziva’s calls when he was working undercover and that was totally understandable, but he’d never not answered a call from Abby. Never.

Maybe his phone died in the water or something. Yeah. That could be it. He just hadn’t gotten a new one yet. Tony rarely bothered answering his landline, so Abby didn’t even think to call his home.

Abby sighed, resolving to stop thinking about why he hadn’t answered. She shook her head, pigtails bouncing, deciding that a tie was definitely not the right thing. Or any sort of clothing really. Unless she got him a cape, but she couldn’t really see Tony wearing that. Even if he would look good in it. He definitely had the legs for tights. Not that she’d ever tell him so.

Further up the street a store selling blown glass and crystal items. The multitude of crystal glassware in the store caused the light to reflect and refract, creating sparkle and rainbows throughout the store. Abby thought it was delightful, and stepped in to browse even though she didn’t really expect to find anything for Tony. He didn’t seem like the sort who would want something so fragile.

Abby grinned as she spotted several shelves of paperweights. Studying them she saw several shaped like football helmets. She nearly clapped her hands in delight when she spotted one that was clearly Ohio State. It didn’t really scream ‘hero’ the way a medal or a plaque might, but it was something she knew Tony would appreciate. Especially when she saw the sign that said the store offered personalized etching and custom lettering upon request. If she bought one, she’d definitely have to get his team number from college and his
Abby debated for several minutes. It wasn’t grand enough to convey the immensity of her gratitude, but she wasn’t sure there was anything she could buy which could really do that. But it was perfect for Tony. And it would look great on his desk.

She decided to get it….just in case she couldn’t find anything better. She’d keep looking, because she still wanted perfect, but she didn’t want to be empty handed when she saw Tony on Monday. It was bad enough she’d waited this long.

She carried her prize to the clerk. “I’d like to have this customized.”

“Certainly.” He took out a piece of paper and asked her what she wanted, pen poised to write her request. He told her it would be ready two hours if she wanted to come back then.

“Perfect.” She’d have time to keep looking while they worked on the paperweight. She even picked out colored paper for them to gift wrap it. Initially she’d wanted black, but ultimately decided on silver with red ribbon. It was a close as they had to Ohio State’s team colors.

Abby was glad the paper wasn’t the cheap tissue thin stuff. Tony never chintzed out on anything he got for her. She couldn’t really do any less.

She skipped out of the store, imagining his face as he opened her gift. Monday was going to be a good day. She was sure of it.

Jenny Shepard grimaced in pain. She’d put off taking her meds for longer today than usual. Whenever possible she tried to delay use of the prescribed medication, hoping to stave off the inevitable decline in the pills’ effectiveness. The doctor told her the pain would only get worse. And as it worsened the painkillers needed to control it would ultimately be so strong as to make it impossible for her to function normally. She was not looking forward to the end.

Jenny considered asking Ducky for a second opinion. Not that she had any genuine doubts as to the accuracy of the diagnosis, but hope springs forth eternal, and she hadn’t come to terms yet with the prognosis. She wasn’t sure how to come to terms with being told she had a terminal illness. Dealing with being told she was dying by inches was harder than she’d expected.

Her doctor had suggested a therapy group to help her cope, but Jenny had politely refused. She hadn’t admitted to wanting or needing anyone to hold her hand in years, she wasn’t about to start now. She didn’t want anyone else to know. Possibly not ever, which was the main reason she hadn’t asked Ducky to do any tests yet. He would honor his Hippocratic Oath, and keep her secret, she was sure of that, but he’d be one more person who knew just how sick she truly was.

She poured herself a glass of bourbon. Her time with Gibbs had definitely given her a taste for a drink that she used to despise. She sipped the harsh liquid, sighing softly. She wondered if any of her preferences had rubbed off on him. She smiled wryly. It was doubtful. The man was a force unto himself.

Her cellphone rang startling her. Jenny flinched, cursing loudly as she struggled to get out of the leather chair. The illness was starting to affect her coordination at odd moments as well. It wasn’t unexpected but still caught her by surprise.

She reached for the phone, gasping as the pain spiked unexpectedly. “Shepard,” she ground out curtly when she flipped her phone open.
There was a pause on the other end. “Is this a bad time, Jenny?”

“No, Tony.” She immediately softened her tone, trying to sound normal. “The phone startled me.” She forced a laugh. “I was bit overly focused on work when it rang.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault.” She smiled, trying to infuse her voice with warmth. She looked around her desk, seeking her bottle of pills. She was going to have to give in and take the damn things.

“What can I do for you?”

Tony cleared his throat. “I…ah…I wanted to talk to you about taking some time off.”

Jenny frowned, trapping her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she struggled to pry the cap off the pill bottle. He didn’t sound ill. By all accounts, he’d been functional at the scene. Tony hadn’t stopped by the hospital so obviously he hadn’t required any medical attention. There was no reason for him to need any more time off.

“I already gave you several days.” It was far more generous than she’d planned to be, but the team wouldn’t be willing to do much without Gibbs. And he definitely needed time to recover whether he thought so or not.

“I’m going to need more than a few days.”

She blinked. There was steel in his voice. And while she knew he could be as hard as Gibbs when the situation called for it, Jenny hadn’t thought this one of those times. It prompted her to ask, “Tony, are you all right?”

“I’m really not sure.”

She put down the pill bottle, freeing a hand to once more hold the phone. Had she heard him wrong? His answer should have been ‘I’m fine’ because that was what he always said. His being consistently fine was something she’d come to rely on. Nothing fazed him or kept him down for long. It made him reliable, dependable and so damn useful to her when Gibbs was gone, and even after Gibbs was back.

She’d picked him for to infiltrate La Grenouille’s organization through is daughter because she knew he would handle the added work load without complaint, and would follow orders without asking too many questions. McGee would never have been able to handle double duty or keep the operation a secret. Ziva could have, but she was the wrong gender. The profile Jenny had on Jeanne put her firmly in the heterosexual category and she wasn’t the sort to arrange a family meeting for just a good friend. Nor would La Grenouille care much about his daughter’s friends, but her lover…to meet her lover, someone she was serious enough about to consider living with, for that he’d come to the US. So the only way to get close enough La Grenouille was to provide the perfect lover for Jeanne. Jenny thought Tony could sleep with Jeanne and not get attached. His track record certainly implied he could handle doing so. Who knew he had it in him to fall in love? Or be so stupid as to think there was any other way for the relationship to end but badly?

Jenny took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. She needed to focus on the issue at hand. La Grenouille was out of the picture. She’d seen to that personally. But she needed Tony around. A good dog, her father told her, was one that could hunt and still be brought to heel; it paid to keep one when you found it.

“What do you mean you’re not sure, Tony?” How the hell could he not be sure?
“Just what I said.” She didn’t need to see him to know he was standing almost at attention. “I don’t know if I’m all right. And at this point I don’t know what would even define that condition for me.”

Tony sighed deeply. For the first time she could remember he sounded tired…not just physically, but something more. She struggled to find the right term. Her grandmother had used it years ago, and it seemed to be the only thing that fit, ‘soul weary’. Jenny hadn’t understood it then, but she had a feeling the way Tony sounded now was exactly what the old woman had been trying to describe.

“I’ve been working 24/7, Jenny, for more than a year. I need a break.”

It was a statement of fact. He wasn’t asking for sympathy or understanding. But she wanted to snarl at him just the same. She wanted to yell at him to suck it up and be a man. She’d been working for longer than that to see her father avenged, knowing her time was running short. Jenny held on to her temper, refusing to give into the desire to rant and rave at him, waiting for him to say more.

“I talked to some…friends.” His hesitation was so minor it was almost no existent. She noticed the pause, but before she could really give it much thought Tony continued speaking. “I’ve weighed my choices…and I think a leave of absence is my best option.”

A leave of absence could be anywhere from six weeks to six months. No way in hell was she going to agree to that. She glared at the wall, wishing she could turn the same hard stare on Tony. She wasn’t going to just give him months to get his head out of his ass like she had Gibbs.

She bit back an annoyed growl. He talked to some ‘friends’? What friends was he referring to? It couldn’t have been anyone on the team.

Gibbs wouldn’t be sympathetic, and he wasn’t the sort Tony would confide in when it came to any uncertainty. Jenny knew first hand that the man simply had no tolerance for doubts or anything less than decisive action. Tony might talk to Ziva, but Jenny knew most efforts at a heart to heart conversation between them ended badly. They clearly didn’t understand one another; Ziva pushed too hard and wouldn’t tolerate him pushing back. That lack of equality alone all but guaranteed a failure to find common ground.

Not to mention that for both Gibbs and Ziva anything less than a life threatening injury was the same as being ready for action. Emotions got checked at the door and never, ever, got in the way of doing the job. They were both cold blooded that way. Tony wouldn’t want to look weak in front of them by revealing any doubts or fears.

McGee was still regarded as a Probie. Tony wouldn’t go to him for advice. Abby and Ducky were possibilities, but Jenny doubted Tony spoke to them either. She knew he felt he had to look strong for them, to be like Gibbs in their eyes. He wouldn’t admit any weakness to them either.

He didn’t speak to his father. His mother was dead. And the current paperwork in his file didn’t list anyone he was close to. That left who? His frat brothers and drinking buddies? She rolled her eyes. Like a bunch of jocks he might see once a year to reminisce about the good old days could possibly give him anything even vaguely resembling valuable advice. She was tempted to ask if he was drunk, ironically ignoring the stiff drink she’d put down only a moment ago. Since the diagnosis, she’d been drinking more and more heavily each night.

“Are you sure your friends,” she couldn’t help the derisive emphasis she placed on the word, “have your best interest in mind?”

“Yes, they do.” His tone had gone stiff and formal, holding no warmth.
Recognizing she’d conveyed more than she wanted to, Jenny backpedaled. Pissing him off could be bad. He didn’t show it often, but he had a temper and there was a hard core in him. Tony might not be as rigid as Gibbs, but he could be just as unbendable when he chose to be.

“Tony, you love the job.” She tried to sound caring, like she could be trusted to have his well being at heart. “Are you sure a leave of absence is really what you want? You will go crazy sitting around your apartment with nothing to do.”

She’d used his faith in her position as Director to convince him to keep quiet about La Grenouille and Jeanne until it was impossible not to. She’d managed to convince him lying to Gibbs was a good idea. She could use his trust again to create the illusion she actually cared about him. She needed him on Gibbs team, doing his job and keeping her in the loop with what was going on, giving her someone in her corner. Gibbs kept trying to shut her out and that was unacceptable.

“Jenny--”

“NCIS is your life.” She kept her voice encouraging, cutting him off. She could convince him to see things her way. She was sure of that. “You don’t want to be left out of the action.”

She was oddly grateful Gibbs had been so stupid as to simply walk out, running off to Mexico to lick his wounds. Tony never would have shifted loyalties if he hadn’t been deserted so abruptly, left to fend for himself and look after a team he felt inadequate to be in charge of. Until then, Tony hadn’t even liked her. But with the door open, Jenny had seen the golden opportunity for what it was---a chance to capitalize on Tony’s feelings of abandonment, the need for someone to show faith in abilities, to give him direction. He never called her ‘boss’, but he followed her lead like a good agent was supposed to, and that was all that mattered.

When Gibbs’ returned, she’d known he was going to be an ass about taking back his place, his desk, his team. It was the man’s nature. She couldn’t have stopped him, and she didn’t want to. She knew it would work in her favor in the long run, driving another wedge between Tony and Gibbs.

She dangled the job in Spain, testing Tony’s commitment. And he passed with flying colors---just like she thought he would. Oh he might have claimed to stay because Gibbs needed him, but she knew it was really more his insecurity about being team leader and the case that kept him in D.C. He was the only one who didn’t think he was ready to lead his own team, but she’d been quick to reassure him that he’d made the right choice. The lie had come easily to her; telling him taking his time on the career track was better than rushing up the ladder. She’d also made sure to immerse him more deeply in the hunt for La Grenouille, keeping him focused. She didn’t want him to have time to go back to being Gibbs’ lap dog or think about why no one else on the team was involved in the case.

Fortunately, the rest of the team seemed to be doing things to keep him loyal to her. They couldn’t refrain from repeatedly pointing out what they perceived of as his shortcomings as a leader. He really had done an excellent job, but the fact that they refused to see it definitely played well for Jenny.

Tony continued to have excellent insights and observations that were routinely dismissed or that the others felt the need to constantly upstage. Jenny knew Gibbs liked to foster rivalry on his team, but even she expected him to intervene. When he didn’t, she used those moments to subtly bolster Tony’s ego, letting him know how much she appreciated his good work.

“I know it’s been rough…and I’m grateful you’ve stuck it out.” She was grateful. She’d have never had the chance to finally finish off Rene Benoit and do what need to be done if Tony hadn’t played his role so well.
“I can appreciate that you’re tired, but things are getting better.”

That was an outright lie, and she knew it, because nothing had changed. Finding out about Tony’s undercover operation had made the team even more catty about things. They didn’t seem inclined to be very forgiving or understanding. They seemed to have forgotten their own silence with regard to their secrets. That hypocrisy was one more thing she thought might work in her favor. If she could turn it to her advantage.

“Tony—”

“Director, I want the time off.” The statement was quiet, uncompromising. The use of her title was a clear indication of his distancing himself from her. Not using her first name was deliberate. “I will be taking it.”

“Excuse me?” Her back stiffened.

“I will be taking the time one way or another.”

“Meaning what?” She didn’t appreciate his tone. She was in charge. His taking time was her decision, not his.

“You either give me the time off or I quit.”

She sneered. He was bluffing. “You won’t quit.”

“You know, so many people said it, I didn’t think it possible anyone could forget it.”

Jenny frowned, not following what he was saying. Said what? Forget what?

“I’m not Gibbs.” She could envision the tight, bitter smile he was likely sporting. “I don’t do Semper Fi. And I’ve got more in my life than some fucking boat in the basement or a run down shack on the beach in Mexico.”

She didn’t think that was true, but elected not to say so. Instead she argued, “You never worked anywhere as long as you have at NCIS.”

“True.” Tony’s chuckle was warm and lighthearted. “I used to be good at leaving. I could be again. And really…Director, telling me I’ve stayed so long, is just one more argument that it is high time I left.”

She cursed silently. Jenny reached for the card that he claimed kept him from taking the position in Spain. “Gibbs needs—“

“Bullshit.” Tony interrupted his voice hard and cold. “He doesn’t need me. And probably never did. And I sure as hell don’t need any more shit from you, them or NCIS in general. Forget my asking you for time off. I won’t be needing permission for that. You’ll have my resignation Monday morning.”

“Tony, wait—“

The connection terminated before she could say any more. She threw her phone against the wall, furious at having misread him and the situation so badly. God damn it. Monday was not going to be a good day.
Tony, Joe and Levon talk about what he's going to do after his talk with the director.

“That went well.” Tony grimaced as he set his cell phone down on the coffee table.

“Sounded like it.” Levon’s tone was dry as he handed Tony a beer before sitting down on the couch.

Levon and Joe had gone into the kitchen ostensibly to give Tony privacy, but the house wasn’t that big, and Tony knew they were bound to overhear some of his conversation with Jenny. He wouldn’t have minded if they’d elected to stay in the same room. It wasn’t like they hadn’t already discussed his options and what he was going to talk to her about. He had never kept secrets from Joe and Levon. They were possibly the only people he could honestly say that about, and he wasn’t going to start hiding things from them now.

Tony sighed, sitting down in the recliner and taking a sip of the cold beverage. “I really thought she’d just give me the time off.” Time off to get his head on straight had seemed like such a reasonable request.

“You weren’t bluffing on the resignation, were you?” Joe asked, sitting next to Levon on the couch, casually draping one arm around his shoulder.

“No, I wasn’t bluffing.” Tony shook his head, more disappointed than angry.

Joe nodded. “Good.”

Tony appreciated his cousin’s endorsement. It was always nice to know someone else he respected thought he’d made the right decision, especially when he’d made his choice in the heat of the moment.

He hadn’t intended to just quit that way. But Shepard’s complete lack of understanding coupled with her being so focused on her own needs sealed the deal. He was done taking a back seat when it came to his own life. Obviously going above and beyond the call for her for months had meant nothing. It was just more shit like he got from his teammates.

It was always what have you done for me lately? And for her to think he didn’t know a lie when he heard one. Christ, did she truly think him that stupid? Things were not getting better at the office. His teammates didn’t trust him completely now. How was he supposed to keep doing his job when everyone around him second guessed his motives, intelligence, and ability? Tony could understand how they might feel resentment or betrayed about the La Grenouille case….but if anyone had the right to be resentful or suspicious, it was him. Shepard had played him. And it wasn’t as if the others could claim they’d been completely forthcoming about all aspects of their lives either. At least he had orders to keep things secret; they didn’t have even that much of an excuse.

Tony sighed. He’d given up or outright lost a lot in the past year and a half. They were changes he needed time to adjust to. Tony had simply wanted a chance to come to terms with how things were now. It was obviously more than Shepard was prepared to give him.

Tony’s jaw clenched. He’d meant every damn word about quitting. He wasn’t Gibbs. He did have more in his life than his job…or at least he had before he’d started working for Shepard, and the job consumed so much of his life. She shouldn’t have assumed NCIS was all Tony cared about. Or that no one else cared about him. Fucking bitch, Tony thought savagely.

Fuck his entire team too, just for good measure. He might be a bit of a goofball at work, but damn it, he wasn’t a joke. Four months he’d been responsible for them, but the first sign of trouble it was Gibbs they
turned to. He pulled his weight, never let them down before or since, and not one of them had balls enough to look him in the eye and tell him he did a good job or admit to having any sort of faith in him or his abilities. He wasn’t looking for accolades, or a medal, but it was obvious McGee, Ziva, and even Abby didn’t think he was worth anything.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He would miss them just the same. They had been an integral part of his life. There was no denying that. And even being so shabbily treated, he hadn’t truly been planning to quit. A little time off, get some perspective, and get back into the game. That had been his plan.

“I wish it hadn’t come to this.”

“Ya can wish in one hand,” Levon said quietly.

“And piss in the other,” Joe added.

“It’ll be a sure bet which one gets wet,” Tony finished. He gave them a wry grin. They were right. Wishing didn’t mean much of anything. It was better to suck it up and deal with reality.

“I love you guys.” They grounded him the way no one else ever had.

"Feeling is mutual.” Levon saluted Tony with his beer. Joe just grinned at him.

“Not sure what to do now,” Tony admitted hesitantly. For all the jobs he’d left over the years, he’d never done so without knowing exactly where he was going next. It was almost overwhelming to think about what to do with his life now. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes. Starting over sucked.

“Yeah, it does.” Joe’s agreement let Tony know he’d actually said the last part aloud. “But you don’t have to do it alone.”

“I know.” Tony smiled, grateful that he was in Houston, with them, when he’d made his stand. He wasn’t sure he’d have had the strength to resign if he’d still been in D.C. He would have worried too much about what he might be losing. Here at least he could focus on what he still had, and might be gaining.

“You going to hand deliver your resignation to her?”

“No.” Tony smiled. “It’ll piss her off more to just walk in and see it on her desk.” He’d considered just e-mailing it, but if there was one thing Tony had learned working for the government…it was always a best to back up everything with a hard copy. And his return flight put him back in DC late Saturday night. That was plenty of time to go to the office, drop of his resignation, his badge and gun. He could be in and out in under an hour and no one would even think it strange his showing up in the wee hours of the morning.

“Anything o’ yours ya need to get from the office? Personal stuff in yer desk?” Levon asked. “Be best to get that then, too.”

Levon was definitely right about that. They’d jerk his clearance the second his resignation became public knowledge. For all he knew Shepard had already pulled his clearance to prevent him from gaining access. He wouldn’t put it passed her to be that petty. But the security guards all knew him. It would be a piece of cake to get someone to let him in—he could always claim it was another clerical error. Like when administration declared him dead two years after he started working at NCIS and had locked him out of the building, computer system and everything else they could think of.

Tony did a quick mental review of what he had at his desk and then shrugged. “Nothing there I couldn’t
He kept things he enjoyed at the office, items that gave him a sense of ownership and marked the desk as his, but nothing of true personal significance. It was a habit he’d never outgrown after moving around so much early in his career. It was a lot easier to just walk out the door unnoticed if he wasn’t carrying a box of things with him. In the past, his relationship with most of his coworkers hadn’t always ended well. Better to just slip out unnoticed than be forced into any sort of confrontation. Or worse yet, in Tony’s opinion, to get trapped in some lingering goodbye that he didn’t want or need.

“Got a few things I’ll want to give away though.” He’d make sure McGee got his American Pie mug, Ziva could have his letter opener, and Ducky would get his Mighty Mouse stapler. He grinned to himself. It would be poetic justice to leave those items on their desks with a brief good bye note. They were after all the things they’d shown a preference for. And apparently all they cared about when they thought he was dead.

He had to give Gibbs back his medals. Tony was never sure why the former Marine had entrusted them to him in the first place. He figured Stan Burley had kept them before Tony was hired and keeping them was just one more responsibility that came with being Gibbs’ senior agent. Gibbs could give them to McGee or Ziva or maybe he’d just pass them on to Tony’s replacement. It really didn’t matter.

“What about your apartment?” Joe asked. “Do you want to pack that up yourself or have movers do it?”

Tony hesitated, thinking over his options. It was a foregone conclusion that without a job, he wouldn’t be staying in D.C. What he had in savings and the small trust fund from his grandmother that his father hadn’t been able to cut him off from was enough to live on, at least for a little while, but it wasn’t enough he could be unemployed indefinitely. Joe and Levon had already invited him to stay for as long as he liked when he’d simply been planning a leave of absence. But he wasn’t sure they wouldn’t object to him moving in for longer if he had to. He didn’t want them to think of him as a mooch.

“You are the only person who uses the guest room, Tony.” Joe gave him a pointed look, clearly knowing where his thoughts had been headed. “It is your room. And you can stay as long as you like.”

Tony felt his face warm, nodding his understanding. For as close as he was to Joe and Levon, their innate generosity still managed to surprise him at times. He simply wasn’t used to people giving so freely and expecting so little.

“Moving my stuff—” Tony trailed off as he thought over which would be better, packing it himself or hiring it done. He’d acquired some things he’d prefer not to have someone else move. They were not necessarily fragile, but he didn’t want just anyone packing up his wardrobe or handling the lockbox he kept his guns in. And packing himself would save money.

“We could help ya pack everything, if you want,” Levon offered calmly. “Yer bringing it all here to store it anyway.”

Tony shook his head. “I couldn’t ask you to—”

“Ya didn’t ask. We offered.” Levon smiled, brown eyes sparkling with good humor. “Not like flying up ta DC and driving home would be a big deal. We could think of it as a road trip…without the site seeing.”

Tony stared at Levon. “But a plane ticket—”

“Won’t cost that much.” Joe pointed his finger at Tony. “And it will be money well spent, so I don’t want to hear any argument from you.”
“What about work?” Joe and Levon had a sizeable caseload. It wasn’t like they could just take a few more days off without someone objecting. Tony didn’t want helping him to cause them trouble.

“Beaumont won’t mind us taking another few days.”

As head of the Major Crimes Squad, Lieutenant Joanne Beaumont was Joe and Levon’s boss. She and Levon had been partners at one time before she’d decided she wanted to advance her career and worked her way up the ladder. Unlike Gibbs and Shepard, there had never been anything romantic or even remotely sexual between Levon and Joanne. He liked and respected her, and thought she was a capable, qualified leader. Tony knew they had an excellent balance between being their working relationship and their friendship. If he said she wouldn’t mind, then he was probably right. But Tony still wanted to be certain.

“She really won’t mind?”

“We got time on the books she been after us use up.” Levon shrugged. “She is always telling us to take the time allotted before she has to force us to take it.”

“I’m thinking she meant you should take a vacation” Tony sighed. “Helping me move isn’t exactly a vacation.”

“Ain’t something we do every day either.” Levon grinned. “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop. Leave me sitting around all day with nothin’ to do, and I’ll just get into trouble.”

Joe chuckled, ruffling the curls at the back of Levon’s neck. “Truer words were never spoken, Tony.”

“If you’re sure about—“

“We are,” Joe and Levon answered in unison, no doubt or hesitation from either of them.


“Don’t have to thank us, Slick.” Levon made eye contact and held it. “Yer family. Around here, we do for our own, because it’s the right thing to do.”

Tony could feel his face warm. Not for the first time did he consider himself lucky to have people like Joe and Levon in his corner.

“Can you get us seats on Tony’s flight?” Levon asked Joe.

“Should be able to book on line. As long as there is room still available.” Joe got up, heading for the room that served as a small home office.

To Tony’s knowledge, the office PC was Joe since Levon never used the computer at home. He wasn’t ignorant of how to use it, and from what Joe had told Tony, Levon was actually good with technology… when he wanted to be. Levon simply preferred to let Joe take the lead when it came to anything that required more than basic technological savvy. And since Joe was nearly as good as McGee when it came to computers, it made sense to just let him handle it.

They took the same approach to their finances. Levon was far better at handling money than Joe would ever be. So Levon was the one who made sure the bills got paid and the checkbook balanced. Tony idly wondered if he’d ever have a relationship that trusting and so equal.

Levon reached for the cordless phone that sat on the end table. “I’ll call a buddy of mine who works for a
rental company. If they don’t have something we can use in the area, he’ll know who does.”

“This buddy someone else who owes you a favor?” Tony asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Nope.” Levon laughed. “Not everyone does, Tony, no matter what Joe says.”

Tony snickered. He had a feeling Joe was more right than not. Levon had a way of making people feel indebted to him without really meaning to. Tony certainly felt like he owed the blond a lot. Levon didn’t have to treat him like family welcoming him with open arms, or readily agree to let him stay, or offer to help him move.

“We get done with this, we’ll fire up the grill. Have us some steaks.”

Tony gave Levon an incredulous look. Steaks were something Joe and Levon tended to reserve more for special occasions or in celebration.

“I just burned some bridges, Cowboy.” And he was likely going to set fire to a few more by not saying good bye in person or letting his teammates take whatever last shots they wanted to get in. “That’s not usually the sort of thing you celebrate.”

“ Burning the bridge means you got no other option than to sit and stagnate or move forward.” Levon cocked his head to one side. “You are moving forward. I’d say that’s reason enough to celebrate.”

“I’m moving forward with help,” Tony pointed out, not sure he warranted the praise he could hear in Levon’s tone. He thought he was weak. “Gibbs wouldn’t have needed any help,” Tony muttered.

“Gibbs never actually quit either,” Levon pointed out reasonably, his better than average hearing obviously picking up on Tony’s last comment. “Maybe if he’d had a little help, he’d have been able to really leave NCIS for good.”

Tony shook his head. “He was needed there.”

“No. It was more like he needed to be there or he’d have never come back at all.” Levon snorted. “They survived four months without him…safe bet they could have made it longer.”

“Might have survived but they didn’t like it.” The team needed a leader it could trust, and respect, and that clearly hadn’t been him.

“No one likes it when things change, Slick, but that don’t mean change isn’t good for ‘em.” Levon’s brown eyes focused squarely on Tony. “Change is constant. It’s better to be to roll with it than get run over by it.”

“You think I’m rolling with it?”

“I do.” Levon leaned forward. “In the time you worked there…you risked life and limb, heart and soul. Knowing when to say enough is enough isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s just good sense. And I really don’t give a shit what Gibbs would say about that.”

Tony laughed. Levon had never met Gibbs, and he’d made it clear he wouldn’t think much of him if he did. It was liberating for Tony not to be measured by what had become an impossible yardstick.

“Thanks.”
“Told ya, Slick, yer family.” Levon smiled. “O’ course that don’t mean you won’t owe me a stiff drink or two after we get done packing and hauling all yer stuff.”

Tony nodded, smiling back. A good bottle of Levon’s favorite whiskey, even at more than a hundred bucks a bottle, was a cheap price to pay. For what he and Joe had done for Tony, and had so willingly offered to do, a case of the good stuff would still leave Tony owing them.
Gibbs had a quiet weekend at home...or at least that was what he planned to do. Maddie Tyler had reminded him all he’d lost, and he wanted time alone to put his daughter’s memory to rest, to come to terms with what would never be. He wanted to rebury her time capsule and reflect on what sort of woman she might have become if given the chance.

He had grudgingly tolerated the many interruptions, gruffly insisting to all those who asked that he was fine. Abby, Ducky, McGee, Ziva, Sheppard—all of them had either called or stopped by his house. While it was heartwarming to have so many people expressing their concern, it was also just a bit frustrating. He wasn’t some china doll in need of coddling.

Tony was the only one who hadn’t made any effort to contact him. He thought the younger man was likely the only one to truly understand Gibbs’ desire for solitude. Or maybe he was simply the only one willing to respect it. In all honesty, Gibbs hadn’t really given Tony’s absence much thought other than to be grateful he had sense enough to leave him alone.

It wasn’t until he walked into the office Monday morning, cup of hot coffee in hand, that Tony not calling or stopping by became significant. In the center of his desk was the metal box Tony kept Gibbs’ medals in. He frowned, suspiciously eyeing the box and the innocuous envelope braced against it. Gibbs hadn’t considered any envelope to be completely innocent since Tony had been infected with the plague.

He warily set his coffee down on his desk. He relaxed marginally when he saw his name on the envelope written in Tony’s distinctive scrawl. Gibbs unconsciously held his breath as he opened the letter with his knife.

The note inside had been brief, short and to the point. ‘Gibbs, I know hiring a cop with a job jumping habit was a huge risk, and I appreciate you taking a chance on me. I’ve learned a lot from you, and I admit you’ve made me a much better investigator. For that, I thank you. I could write a lengthy diatribe on why I’m quitting, but you aren’t the sort to want or need that. The bottom line is I’ve gone as far as I can at NCIS. I stayed longer than I expected, and probably longer than I should have. There isn’t anything more for me here. I wasn’t sure who you’d want to give your medals to for safe keeping so I am leaving them on your desk. It’s been one hell of a ride.
Tony’

Gibbs scowled. He was sure he’d read the note wrong, misunderstood. Tony wouldn’t quit. He searched his desk for his glasses, reading Tony’s message a second time.

He nearly growled when the second reading confirmed the first. It really was a resignation, albeit an informal one. Gibbs scanned his desk, seeking Tony’s badge and gun. He took a breath, releasing it slowly when he didn’t find either. If Tony really meant to quit he’d leave those behind. They were symbolic of the job, and Tony had been in law enforcement long enough to recognize handing them over meant he was serious, more so than any letter ever would.

This is just some sort of stupid joke, Gibbs told himself. He shook his head, jaw clenching. He was pissed Tony would do something like this, something so clearly in bad taste. He’d head smack him into next week for being---Gibbs mental rant stopped short as he glanced over at Tony’s work area. The files which seemed to perpetually grace his inbox were all gone.

Gibbs stalked over to Tony’s desk, wanting to confirm nothing else was out of place. The toys that cluttered the area around his monitor were still there. So too was the Sports Illustrated calendar, and the top left desk
draw was still full of candy. But the back pack Tony used in the field was gone. His sketch pad was missing too. Gibbs checked the filing cabinet and was not entirely surprised to see the spare clothes Tony usually kept here were also missing.

He stepped over to McGee’s desk. Sitting on the center of the blotter was Tony’s American Pie mug. He knew McGee coveted that stupid mug, although he had no idea why. To Gibbs one mug was as good as another. Leaning against it was a nearly identical envelope to the one on Gibbs’ desk. The former Marine was sorely tempted to open it, but refrained from touching it. If it were case related, Gibbs wouldn’t have even hesitated, but this was likely something personal and he felt duty bound to respect that. It wasn’t his place to read the message Tony had left for McGee.

He checked Ziva’s desk, wondering if Tony had left her anything. A letter opener was in the center. Gibbs had no idea what the significance was of that. Like the mug, it was hardly an item that was hard to come by or seemed terribly special to Gibbs. Under it was another envelope with Ziva’s name on it.

He cursed. This was definitely not a joke. Tony clearly meant it when he said he was quitting.

“Over my dead body,” Gibbs muttered. He’d be the one to decide who left his team and when. He grabbed his coffee cup, intent on heading to Tony’s apartment.

Tony said he could go on at length for why he was leaving but hadn’t because he didn’t think Gibbs would be interested—he was about to find out how wrong he was. Gibbs was very interested, and he wanted answers. He wanted them now.

Gibbs hit the button for the elevator with more force than necessary. Everything was fine just a few days ago. Things were finally back on track for the team after that La Grenouille debacle. Sure, Ziva and McGee were giving Tony a hard time about some things—that wasn’t out of the ordinary. They always gave each other a hard time. And Gibbs hadn’t cut Tony any slack, but he never had.

What the hell had happened to make Tony just walk away without talking to Gibbs first? If it had been a family emergency, Tony could have just asked for a leave of absence. Not that he had any family he’d be needed for. Gibbs knew Tony’s mother was dead, he hadn’t spoken to his father in years, and Tony didn’t have any siblings. There wasn’t any one else.

If he was sick he could have also taken time off. He plenty of sick leave available to him. And it wasn’t like he’d have to quit—unless whatever was wrong would have affected his fitness for field duty. But Gibbs doubted anything could have cropped up in just a few days that would be so devastating Tony had to quit immediately.

Gibbs knew Tony had meant it when he told Shepard he wasn’t working undercover for her again. He’d been far too adamant to be lying about that. So this wasn’t some secret case in disguise sort of thing. He shook his head, punching the elevator button again. There was no good reason for Tony to have been fine one day and quit the next.

The doors to the elevator finally opened. Gibbs moved to step inside, only to be brought up short by the Director trying to step out. He was surprised to see her. She wasn’t ordinarily in the office quite so early. No one got to the office as early as Gibbs.

“Jenny.” He moved to step around her, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Good morning, Jethro.” She smiled. “I need to see you in my office for a few minutes.”

“I don’t have time right now.”

“You get a call about a case?” She arched an eyebrow, regard him coolly. “I wouldn’t think you’d be
leaving without your team. At least not quite so soon after your last lone wolf escapade. Or are you harboring suicidal tendencies I was unaware of?”

Gibbs bit back a sharp retort. Going off on his own had been a bone head move that had nearly gotten Maddie killed. He deserved to take some flack for it. Although, she was hardly the one to judge. If anyone should be giving him a ration of crap it was DiNozzo. He’s the one who’d had to been forced to save the day, risking himself in the process.

“No, I didn’t get a call about a case.” Gibbs managed to keep his voice even.

“And you’ve already got coffee.” She nodded toward the cup in his hand. “So I’m sure there isn’t anything too pressing that you can’t spend a few minutes in my office.”

Gibbs could contradict her. But then he’d have to rationalize where he was going and why. She wouldn’t let him leave without some sort of explanation. Her expression and body language radiated a not so subtle challenge that told him plainly she wouldn’t back down.

He didn’t want to lie and he sure as hell didn’t want to tell her the truth. If Tony hadn’t mentioned to her yet his decision to quit Gibbs wasn’t going to be the one to say anything. He still thought he had a chance to talk to Tony, kick his ass and see to it Tony got his head on straight. No one but him and the team would need to be aware of this moment of temporary stupidity.

“I’ve got a few minutes,” Gibbs finally said, turning to follow Jenny.

She nodded once, accepting his decision gracefully. Gibbs stifled a snort. Like he’d had a choice at all? It made Gibbs want to head smack her, even as another part of him felt some pride in having taught her how to put people in a corner so well.

When Gibbs entered her office, he immediately spotted the gun and badge on her desk blotter. He cursed under his breath. At least now he knew what Tony had done with them. Why the hell had he given them to Jenny of all people?

He watched Jenny’s lips tighten and her eyes narrow as she saw the same thing he did. Gibbs frowned. Her expression was more annoyance and anger than surprise. And surprise or even outright confusion was more what Gibbs would have expected—unless she already knew Tony was planning to quit. That also explained why Tony had left his badge and gun on her desk.

“You knew.”

She ignored him, crossing her office to set her briefcase and purse down on the floor near her desk. Jenny picked up Tony’s badge and gun, setting them off to the side. Gibbs grimaced when he saw yet another envelope. Tony had certainly been busy writing. He wondered if hers was more detailed than what Tony had left for Gibbs.

“Were you planning to tell me he was quitting when you dragged me up here?”

She gave him a cool look, facing him from behind her desk. “He left something for you then?”

Gibbs glared at her. “Answer my question.”

“Yes, I wanted to tell you he’d talked about leaving.” She glared back at him, her chin rising. “I was hoping he’d changed his mind, but obviously he didn’t.”

“When the hell did you talk to him?” Gibbs snarled, furious that Tony hadn’t talked to him first. He was
“the first person Tony should have come to.  “And why didn’t you talk him out of this?”

“What? Like I talked you out of leaving?”  Her laugh was harsh and unpleasant.  “You think he’d listen any better to me than you do?  Please.”

“He’s not me!”

“Funny, that’s what he told me too.”  Jenny’s lips curled upward in bitter smile.  “I guess I won’t have to misfile his resignation the way I did yours.”

“Excuse me?”  Gibbs planted himself in front her desk, glaring at her.  She was just going to let him quit?  “You can’t be seriously thinking of accepting—“

“The hell I can’t!”  She leaned forward, meeting his angry gaze unflinchingly.  “He quit, Special Agent Gibbs.  That’s not the sort of thing usually open for discussion.”

“It is when I don’t even know why he quit!”  Gibbs raged.

“You want to know why he quit?”  She rolled her eyes.  “Are you telling me you don’t think he had reason?”

Gibbs opened his mouth, only to snap it shut.  He scowled.  Obviously Tony thought he had reason to quit…and she clearly had some idea of what he thought.  “What are you—"

“I realize to say you don’t talk about anything important is a monumental understatement,”  she straightened, folding her arms over her chest, “and that anything not related to a case might as well be non-existent for you, but even you can’t be that damn blind.”

Gibbs blinked.  “You want to explain that?”

“You treated him like shit when you came back from your margarita safari.  Not one word about how good a job he did.”

“He knows he did a good job.”

“So what…telling him that would have been overkill?”

“You told him he did a good job.  That should have been enough.”

“Of course.  Because it was only my opinion he valued.”

“He valued it enough to take an undercover operation for you.”  Gibbs knew he sounded petty, like a jealous two year old, but it still grated on his nerves that an entire operation was going on which he’d known nothing about.  He could act like nothing had changed in those four months he was gone, except so much had.  And he hated it.

“Tony took the job because you weren’t here.  We both know that.”

“I wouldn’t have allowed it.”  Gibbs agreed.  He would have looked further into Jenny’s obsessions, although he suspected he only thought so now because of everything that had happened since.  When the La Grenouille first came up, he had no more reason to be suspicious than Tony had.  The man was a known arms dealer.  He was exactly the sort of target they should have been taking an interest in.  “Well, then maybe you should have stuck around.”  She snapped at him.  “Or been a bit more altogether when you came back.”
“How—“

“I offered him a job in Spain. His own team. He stayed because he thought you needed him. And what a beautiful job you did of proving him wrong. The great Leroy Jethro Gibbs doesn’t need anyone. Hell no. He can risk life and limb just fine on his own, thank you very much.”

Gibbs stared at her. Tony had been offered his own team? He’d turned it down? Gibbs spat back at Jenny, “I may not have coddled him—“

“Coddled? Shit, Gibbs, you barely gave a damn.”

“That’s not true!”

“All that concern you claim to feel….that would be why you sent him into the rain all night when you were after Ari even though he was still recovering from the plague. And you cared so much you wouldn’t let him have time off after Paula died.” Jenny arched an eyebrow. “And couldn’t be bothered to check on him after Jeanne left.”

Gibbs flushed. He had been careless with Tony’s health, but he was sure Tony understood. He’d wanted Ari as much as Gibbs had. And working was the best thing for Tony after Paula died. But Jeanne….that wasn’t Gibbs’ fault. He wasn’t taking any blame for that clusterfuck. “He wouldn’t have even had to deal with Jeanne leaving if you hadn’t gotten him into that mess.”

Jenny’s eyes glittered, dangerously hard. “At least I had sense enough to thank him now and again for going above and beyond the call.” “Some thanks.” Sarcasm dripped from his tone.

“Who are you to judge?” She sneered. “He saved your life just a few days ago, and you couldn’t be bothered to even look at him.”

“He never stopped by,“ Gibbs defended himself, suppressing the flash of guilt. He should have offered some thanks to Tony. “It would be too much effort for you to call him? Or stop by his place? Clearly he’s the only one who should give.” “He’s not the only one—“

“Oh please.” She rolled her eyes. “Like you ever gave up anything. You made him give up the team you stuck him with because you changed your mind. He gave up any changes made that might have actually allowed the team to function better. He gave up any respect he might have gotten from his peers. Hell, he even gave up his own theories in favor of yours because clearly a war hero couldn’t possibly have been a killer.”

“He wasn’t.” Gibbs gritted his teeth. “No, he wasn’t, but Tony was right to consider the option. And you know it. It’s one of your famous rules after all….we don’t assume.”

Gibbs firmly resisted the urge to slap her. He’d forgotten how arguing with women always made him feel stupid. He’d never won when it came to his ex-wives either.

“And let’s not forget him getting a concussion because you’re old boss carried more weight with you than he did.” “That’s—“
She cut him off. “Or any other dozen concussions you might have given him with those head slaps.”

“Those are a wake up call.” It was a useful training tool, a form of discipline, nothing more. “So why don’t you hit Ziva or McGee just as hard? And you can’t tell me they don’t need it.” Jenny pointed a finger at him. “McGee’s sister ring any bells? Or that stupid novel? Or Abby nearly dying in that robotic Hummer because he wasn’t paying attention. Ziva fell for a dying man on your watch for crying out loud.”

“You have a problem with how I run my team?” Gibbs growled. She’d been messing with his team since she started as Director. She needed to butt the hell out, Gibbs thought darkly.

“No, I don’t have a problem with how you run your team.” She took a breath, letting it out with a small huff. “But that doesn’t mean everyone on your team appreciates you playing favorites.”

“Tony’s an adult, not a child.” That sort of thing shouldn’t bother him. All he had to do was his damn job and do it well. Besides, Tony did his best work when Gibbs kept him on his toes.

“Yes, he is an adult.” Jenny agreed coolly. “And he’s made his decision. He quit.” She snatched up the envelope, holding it out to Gibbs. “Now we have to deal with it.”

“And I intend to.” Gibbs slapped the envelope away. He wasn’t going to read it. He didn’t need to. “I’m going to get him back.”

“I wish you luck,” she stated calmly, “because I can’t see him agreeing to come back to a team that doesn’t trust or respect him.”

“He told you that?” Gibbs stared at her.

“He didn’t have to tell me that. I could see that for myself.” Jenny shook her head. “The first sign of trouble, they run to you. They dismiss any insight or input he has until it’s proven, but they have faith in your gut like it was God himself. And now they act like he can’t be trusted to go to the dentist or the bathroom by himself.”

“If he wanted to be trusted, he shouldn’t have lied to them.” Or to me, Gibbs added mentally, especially not to me. And respect was earned not given.

“Right…because everyone on your team is so fucking forthcoming.” She hissed, leaning forward to rest her hands on the desktop. “None of them had secrets, no. Of course not.” Jenny sneered. “And you…well you are just a font of information aren’t you. No secrets, no lies, nothing hidden or withheld. You’re a veritable paragon of virtue. Tell me, Jetho, what is it like to live in a glass house?”

She didn’t give him time to respond. “Tony isn’t some raw recruit. He’s been an agent for seven years. How much experience and skill does it take before he gets his due?”

That stung, and Gibbs had to force himself not to flinch. The truth of what she was saying pissed him off. His anger made him want to sting her the same way she’d done to him.

“His due? Is that what you thought you were giving him by sending him undercover without backup?” Gibbs spat back at her. “Having him work double duty…was that how you showed you trusted him? That you respected him?”

He took petty satisfaction in seeing her wince. Her color heightened with what Gibbs knew was shame. He’d definitely scored a hit.
“I didn’t say I wasn’t part of the problem,” Jenny responded, her tone firm, composure once more in place. “But the problem was there before I ever took this job.”

“How the hell would you know?”

“You don’t think Morrow didn’t keep a file? He briefed me before he left so I’d know just what I was getting myself into. And even if he hadn’t, who do you think Ziva reviewed intel with to profile your team?”

On some level, he had known that. It was only natural that Morrow would review each team with his replacement, giving Jenny their strengths and weaknesses. It was information she’d have needed to do a good job. And Ziva hadn’t come to them initially as a teammate but almost as an adversary. She’d sized them all up for bastard of a brother, not knowing he would ultimately betray Israel, the FBI and her.

Realizing the argument wasn’t going to solve anything, Gibbs turned away from Jenny and headed for the door.

“When I come back with DiNozzo, we’ll settle this.”

“If you come back with him, it won’t be me you’ll have settled with.”

Gibbs slammed the door. He cursed as he headed for the stairs. Jenny was always right at the worst possible times. His gut was screaming at him that this was one of those times.
Ziva sighed tiredly, shutting the door behind her quietly. It had been a long day. She grimaced, shaking her head. She couldn’t remember a day that hadn’t been a long one—not since Tony had left three weeks ago.

She’d never realized before what a difference having Tony around made. Even though she found his childish behavior annoying at times, it had certainly made the slower moments more entertaining. She found she missed tossing paperclips back and forth, and shooting rubber bands at one another. She missed hearing his movie references, and inane chatter. The office was far too quiet and way too tense without him.

And when they got a hot case, she missed having another person to rely on, someone else to carry the workload, to add a new perspective and information. She hadn’t understood how accustomed she’d become to their stable team dynamic until suddenly it shifted with Tony’s absence.

She sighed, kicking off her sneakers. Despite the demands of the day, she’d gone for a long run. She had to. It was the only way to get rid of her anger, sorrow and disappointment. Tony had often made fun of her failure to fully comprehend American slang, but this was the first time her lack of understanding had affected her ability to do her job. It was also the first time Tony hadn’t been there to explain things to her.

Tony would have known what a ‘gypsy’ driver was. He would have understood how to translate ‘working off book’. He would have known the significance of ‘street cash’. She knew from reading his file that he’d worked as a transit cop. He would have recognized a valid hack license, knew how the cab system worked, understood the many ways in which it could operate ill-legally. He would have known how to talk to the dispatcher and get his cooperation. Ziva had scared the hell out of the man with her own interrogation techniques, but in the end, she hadn’t understood his answers. Had she been able to comprehend, known how things worked, they might have been fast enough to actually save Thomas Suri.

Ziva hung her head. They’d arrived only a few minutes too late, but it was enough. The only thing left for them to do was to kill the death squad. At least they could say they’d accomplished that much, but it was a far from the victory Ziva wanted to lay claim to.

Their first truly major case since Tony had left and Ziva knew she’d dropped the ball. How the hell was she supposed to explain to Sayda Suri that her soul mate had died because she couldn’t speak the language? How was Sayda ever supposed to understand her soul mate marrying another woman and fathering a child?

Ziva slammed her fist into the wall. Thomas and Sayda never had a chance to even speak to one another. So much blood, so many tears, all that hope and faith wasted. She cursed vehemently in Hebrew.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Until now, the team hadn’t missed having a fourth—not really. The workload was heavy but manageable. But this case emphasized what Ziva should have known all along---being short a man would cost them all eventually.

Had Tony been there, not only would he have added his expertise, it would have freed up McGee to stay in the office to do what he did best—ferret out information on the computer. McGee was a capable field agent but in this case, he didn’t know any more about cab companies than Ziva.

They had been the blind leading the blind when they’d started researching the cab company. Had it been less than a life and death situation, Ziva was sure it would have been funny to watch them stumble around like it was their first day on the job. As it was, their inexperience got a man killed. There was nothing amusing
about that.

She headed for the bathroom, taking a quick shower. She wished the guilt was as easy to wash away as sweat. Seven years, seven long years the Suris had been separated. It left a bitter taste in Ziva’s mouth that she hadn’t been able to give them even ten minutes together.

Drying off, and slipping into a bathrobe, Ziva made her way to the kitchen. She put the kettle on, thinking a cup of tea might help. If nothing else the chore was familiar, and mindless.

She leaned wearily against the counter as she waited for the water to boil. When the kettle whistled, Ziva filled a mug, dunking an infuser filled with a dark tea from home into the hot water. She breathed in the familiar, rich fragrance, relaxing minutely.

She made her way into her living room to turn on the TV and DVD player. It had become an ingrained habit since Tony left. She had watched the copy of the surveillance footage that Abby had made for her so many times Ziva had each action and nuance memorized; she continued to watch every night when she came home hoping to spot something she’d missed. It was almost a bed time ritual.

She was searching for something that would tell her more than Gibbs or Jenny had about Tony resigning. Neither had been terribly forthcoming. Gibbs, she expected to be closemouthed, but she and Jenny were friends. She expected Jenny to share more with her, to confide in her. But then Jenny hadn’t breathed a word about La Grenouille to Ziva—maybe they were not as close as Ziva had always thought them to be.

Ziva sipped her tea. Something had obviously gone on between Gibbs and Jenny. The air was noticeably chilly whenever they were in the same room together. Ziva wondered if Tony’s quitting hadn’t been some sort of cover for another operation, one Gibbs had objected to. But that wouldn’t explain the notes Tony had left for Ziva and McGee.

Ziva had no idea what McGee’s note had said. Asking to read it seemed too forward, especially when she had no intention of offering her own for McGee to read. Whatever it was had made McGee flush and then lose all color. She suspected his note was akin to hers—a genuine good bye, one with enough of an edge to cut deep, making it plain Tony had no plans to return.

If it was a cover, it was a damn good one and far better than the one Tony had while dating Jeanne, which made Ziva doubt Jenny’s involvement. When they’d worked together, Jenny was good at execution of plans made by others, but not as good at making her own. Details like good-bye notes wouldn’t have occurred to Jenny.

It was possible she’d loaned Tony out to another agency. That would explain the chilly atmosphere between Jenny and Gibbs as well. Gibbs would naturally object to any of his people being passed around for another agency to use. It didn’t entirely explain Tony’s good-byes…unless he thought it was some sort of suicide mission. Ziva refused to consider that idea. He wouldn’t agree to something like that—at least she didn’t think so, but Ziva was increasingly aware of just how little she really knew about Tony.

She wasn’t sure if Gibbs really expected Tony to return or not. He hadn’t filled Tony’s position yet. But Ziva suspected that was more a battle of will between Gibbs and Jenny than the byproduct of any hope of his coming back. Jenny had been trying to force Agent Lee back on Gibbs’ team, and Gibbs had steadfastly refused to even consider taking her.

After today, Ziva wished he hadn’t been so staunch in his stance. They could have done with some help. Even if Lee wasn’t experienced in the field, she could have been helpful. She wasn’t as good as McGee when it came to computers, but she was competent. She could have been busy researching leads while Ziva and McGee followed up outside the office.
Ziva cued the DVD and let it play, settling back to watch the familiar footage. She watched closely as Tony entered NCIS headquarters at 2:02 AM. According to everyone she’d talked to, Tony often came and went in the wee hours. No one even thought it strange. Ziva thought it decidedly odd she hadn’t been aware of Tony’s habit. Why had she never noticed?

A tall, dark haired man entered with Tony. He was Tony’s height, and moved with the same easy, long limbed gait. Ziva had watched them frame by frame more than a dozen times looking for any indication that the stranger was coercing Tony in some way. His hands were in full view of the cameras and he held no weapons. Tony didn’t seem to be trying to avoid him in any way. Both men looked relaxed, their expressions calm and unconcerned. Tony didn’t act like a man being forced to do something against his will. And he certainly hadn’t tried to enlist the guard in any effort to escape.

Ziva had spoken with the security guard on duty. He said Tony introduced the man as ‘Joe’, and asked if it was okay for him to wait in the lobby while Tony ran upstairs and took care of a few loose ends. The guard hadn’t seen anything wrong with Tony’s request. The guard said he and Joe talked about baseball while they waited for Tony to return.

Ziva rolled her eyes remembering that conversation. They really needed to train their security personnel better. He remembered Joe being a Cubs fan, but not his eye color, where he might have been from and what is relationship with Tony was.

The guard had just shrugged when asked. “They seemed like friends, Officer David.”

Ziva had wanted to throttle the man. For all he knew Tony had met the Joe at a bar earlier. The guard hadn’t even asked for a last name or to see any ID.

Watching the screen, she cursed softly. Joe hadn’t touched anything that would give them usable prints. It was impossible to say if that had been deliberate or not.

Abby was using facial recognition software to try and identify him further. He wasn’t a known felon, at least not locally. Abby had expanded the program to search nationwide, but so far they hadn’t gotten a single hit. Realistically, Ziva knew it would take time—a search of that scope would have to—but it was still disappointing to not have their mystery man immediately identified.

Adding in local law enforcement, government agents and military personnel to the scan there were literally over a million faces to compare their mystery ‘Joe’ to. Ziva had stopped asking Abby last week how it was going. Visiting the lab repeatedly to be told there were no hits was frustrating for both of them.

Ziva watched the camera footage shift from the lobby to their floor. Tony stepped off the elevator still looking unconcerned. There was no hesitation. There was also no urgency. It could have been any other day the way he walked to his desk.

It took less than ten minutes for Tony print out the formal resignation he left on Jenny’s desk. That it took so little time could only mean one thing—it had been written before he’d even gotten to the office. Tony jogged up the stairs. He left his badge, gun and resignation on Jenny’s desk and left without a backward glance.

Back on their floor, Tony headed for his desk once more. He stuffed a few things into his backpack, and the sat down to write several notes, folding them into envelopes. All that took him only a few minutes. Clearly he already knew what he wanted to say.

Ziva watched him pull a metal box from his bottom desk drawer and place it on Gibbs’ desk. Ziva hadn’t even known Tony kept the former Marine’s medals. Tony gave the box an almost fond pat, like one might
give a dog. She had never seen the bittersweet smile he made before, and even after so many viewings still wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.

He went to McGee’s desk next putting the American Pie mug casually in the center. It was as though he was giving away something he not only had no use for any more but something he’d never truly valued anyway. It made no sense to her. The mug had to have been something Tony purchased. It had to have been something he wanted at one time, something personal, and Tony had always shown a certain territoriality when it came to his things. Yet, he gave away the mug without hesitation, and took very little from his desk--his sketch pad, his backpack, some clothes from the filing cabinet. He left the rest behind without any sign of remorse.

Tony went to Ziva’s desk next. Her gaze shifted from the screen to where the letter opener he gave her now rested on the bookshelf in front of a framed team photo. When she thought Tony had been killed, Ziva had taken the letter opener as something to remember him by. She hadn’t wanted to appear weak or overly sentimental; the letter opener was sufficiently utilitarian, almost weapon like so she could easily excuse wanting it without attaching any emotional significance to it. No one else needed to know how fondly she remembered the way Tony gestured with it from time to time, how he often succeeded in getting it to balance upright on the point, or that he’d once pretended to dual Ziva with it striking ridiculous poses that wouldn’t have been out of place in most Errol Flynn movies.

She only realized how good her excuse about the opener’s balance had been when, in his note, Tony had told her he wasn’t sure why she’d want something incapable of holding an edge. ‘If anyone could turn the mundane into a useful weapon it would be you, Ziva.’ The line could have been a compliment, but she doubted Tony meant it that way.

When she’d first watched the security footage, Ziva hoped to see some sorrow in Tony, some sign that he hadn’t wanted to leave, or an indication he was being pressured in some way. Repeated viewings only served to confirm what she’d seen the first time---resignation, determination and oddly a lot of relief.

Tony’s next stop was Abby’s lab. He left a note for her and unlike Ziva, McGee and Gibbs, the item he placed on her keyboard was wrapped. It was something he’d pulled from his jacket pocket. Ziva had no idea what it was. Abby refused to open it saying she’d wait until she saw Tony in person. The gift was still in Abby’s lab---safely stored under a large glass beaker encased like some sort of museum piece or relic. Next to it was another wrapped package, also under glass. Abby refused to answer any questions about that one…even when it was Gibbs who asked.

From Abby’s lab, Tony went to the morgue. He left his Mighty Mouse stapler on Ducky’s desk along with another letter. Oddly, it was the only place he lingered. Ziva was still confused by that and inevitably found herself wondering just what it was Tony saw as he glanced around the morgue. What memories did the place harbor for him that made him pause?

Ziva sighed deeply. She sipped her tea watching as Tony made his way back up to the first floor. He was smiling as he stepped off the elevator. It was a true smile…warm and happy.

Looking back on it, Ziva couldn’t honestly remember the last time she’d see Tony smile like that. It had been at least since before Jeanne left. His missing smile, the usual ‘la joie de vivre’ had been one reason Ziva was so sure something was wrong. She’d thought when they all went out for drinks maybe she’d finally discover what the problem was, but Tony had never showed, and they ended up investigating what they thought was his murder.

Joe drew Tony to him, one arm over his shoulder as they left. Ziva had to admit they did look like friends. She consciously tamped down on a flash of jealousy that admission engendered. Joe had gotten one of Tony’s real smiles. He got to share Tony’s space with an honest, easy familiarity Ziva had never
experienced. He’d known Tony was leaving NCIS and the team. He probably knew why Tony quit and where he went.

She snarled at the TV. Three weeks. No e-mail. Not one phone call. No letters. Nothing. How could he just walk away?

“You’re not Gibbs, Tony,” she whispered, realizing for the first time just what that meant.

When Gibbs had run off to Mexico, everyone knew why he’d left. He gave a phone number with Abby. It was a life line for them—a way to call him back when he was needed, to bring him home where he belonged.

She realized with sudden insight, Tony never expected to be needed. He clearly thought he could walk away and would not be missed. NCIS wasn’t his home…not the way it was for Gibbs. So what did Tony think of as home? Where had he gone? Why had he left? Did he miss them? Did he think about the team at all?

Ziva sighed. She hated unanswered questions, but until they could track Tony down, she was stuck with them.

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Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Author's Notes: minor spoilers for the episode Lost and Found.

McGee stared at his computer screen. It confirmed what Abby had told him. Carson Taylor, at the ripe old age of nine, really had beaten Tony’s long standing record on the office movie trivia game. McGee blinked, and closed the game, shaking his head with a heavy sigh.

McGee sighed again. In all the time he’d been a troop leader for the junior rangers, he’d never noticed how much Carson had in common with Tony. But then, until they’d found out Carson was a ‘missing child’ and his father was involved in a cold murder case, McGee hadn’t spent that much time with him.

A few hours one on one with Carson and it was impossible to miss the fact that he was a miniature DiNozzo. The extensive knowledge of movie trivia. Movie posters on his bedroom wall. The Ferrari bed. His fondness for Jazz music. Girly magazines hidden under his mattress. Hitting on Abby. Virtually everything about Carson reminded everyone of Tony.

After six weeks without him around, it was still painful to be confronted with such a blatant reminder of their missing teammate and friend. It was like rubbing salt in an open wound. And for as much as everyone liked Carson, seeing him leave, heading back to the loving arms of his family, was a relief.

McGee grimaced. It would be nice if they could do the same thing for Tony—and for themselves. It had taken only two days to put Carson’s world to right—and McGee hated that they hadn’t been able to do the same thing for themselves. It was maddening, and just a bit depressing.

McGee looked across the office to where Ziva was working on her computer. He often wondered what Tony’s note to her had said, but he was still too afraid of her to ask. His own note had been an odd blend of insult and compliment. That strange combination was rather typical of his relationship with Tony. He kept the American Pie mug safely out of harm’s way, although he hadn’t actually gone as far as Abby had with her present putting it under glass. He’d considered it though. Only the thought of Tony laughing at him for being so foolish kept him from acting on it.

McGee looked toward Tony’s empty desk. They were getting the hang of working without him—in terms of getting the job done—but McGee wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to Tony not being there. The office was too damn quiet without him. The cases were harder. And without Tony to defuse Gibbs’ temper things were a lot more tense. McGee would never say it aloud, but he even missed Tony’s teasing.

McGee looked at the case log he was supposed to be typing. It had been so weird to have Detective Collins ask about Tony. McGee had actually forgotten that Tony worked somewhere else. He’d known Tony had been a cop in a number of other places before coming to NCIS; Tony had certainly mentioned it often enough, but he’d been at NCIS for as long as McGee had known him. He was as much a permanent fixture in McGee’s mind as Gibbs. He never expected either to quit.

Gibbs quit but he hadn’t stayed gone. The four months he was in Mexico hadn’t really felt all that long to McGee. In hindsight, McGee realized that was in large part due to Tony. He’d never realized how much Tony had done to soften the blow of Gibbs being gone. Tony was there to look after them, to keep them focused, to do nearly everything Gibbs had done for them the way Gibbs did it most of the time. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anyone to be Tony for them. The closest they’d come to filling the gap was a nine year old kid, and McGee didn’t want to dwell on what that said about them.

McGee thought it was stupid, but there was no denying he’d been far more motivated to solve Carson’s case because of his similarity to Tony. He couldn’t let the kid down. It would be like failing Tony…again.
Tony hadn’t said so outright, but McGee could read between the lines. He’d fucked up somehow. He’d let Tony down. And while it might not have been the main reason Tony left, McGee was sure it was one of the reasons.

The sight of Collins being led away in hand cuffs made McGee smirk. Collins and Tony had worked together on cold cases, and the prick had the gall to hint around that the reason they hadn’t been solved was Tony’s fault. When he was dumb enough to make more blatant disparaging remarks, Ziva had blooded the bastard’s nose. Even before they’d found out Collins was dirty, McGee wished Ziva hadn’t shown so much restraint. The asshole definitely deserved more than the one hit she’d gotten in.

McGee took no small satisfaction in knowing Collins would be going to jail for a long time. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.

“What have you got, McGee?”

McGee looked up, flinching at Gibbs’ harsh tone and close proximity. He hadn’t even realized the man was there. He frowned in confusion. The case was done. What was he supposed to have? “Boss?”

“On DiNozzo.” Gibbs said quietly, leaning against McGee’s desk. “What have you got?”

McGee bit his lower lip and did is best not to fidget. Gibbs asked him the same question at the end of every day. And every day the answer was the same…nothing.

The first thing he’d done when Gibbs ordered him to find Tony was check his cellphone. But the phone Tony had was government issue, and Tony had left it behind when he quit. One of the property clerks had answered his call, telling McGee the phone had been left with a note saying it was no longer needed and could be reissued to another agent. McGee had taken the phone, not surprised to find Tony had erased everything he’d added—games, ringtones, phone numbers—the phone was as clean as the first day it had been handed out.

Pulling Tony’s phone records, McGee had been genuinely astonished to find that every incoming call in the past six months had been job related—every call was either one of the team or the by-product of one of their cases. He expected calls from women, frat brothers, drinking buddies…hell, even a telemarketer, but there was nothing. It was then that McGee realized how diminished Tony’s social life had become.

Working at the office and undercover wouldn’t have left him much time for anything else. And McGee was aware that Tony hadn’t been dating since Jeanne left. He just hadn’t given it much thought. McGee was ashamed of himself for missing just how much of an affect the relationship had on Tony. It was more than just part of a case, and McGee felt like a heel for every teasing Tony about it.

Outgoing calls on Tony’s cell weren’t much different. Calls to the team or case related dominated, along with numbers for take out restaurants and delivery places.

His home phone had been nearly inactive, which McGee expected. Like the rest of the team, Tony’s cellphone had been his primary line. McGee wasn’t even sure why Tony bothered having a land line.

But it had given him a tenuous lead. There was one number on both the incoming and outgoing call list that appeared about once a month. The area code was for Houston, Texas. And Houston was where Tony had gone a few days before he quit. The number was unlisted and so far every effort McGee had made to find out more had been blocked.

It made him think whoever had the number was a government agent or in law enforcement of some kind. It
wasn’t uncommon for access to be restricted if that were the case. McGee had tried calling the number from his cell and the office phone, but he’d been blocked each time. It was almost as though a restraining order had been put in place, or something similar that kept his calls from getting through. Abby had tried from her cellphone as well. She’d gotten further than McGee, getting a computerized voice on an answering machine. She’d left a message but, as far as McGee knew, no one had called back.

The next step had been to pull Tony’s financial records. They revealed a round trip plane tickets were the last thing he bought using his debit card. There was no information on where he’d stayed in Houston or what he’d done there since he hadn’t used credit for anything, at least so far as McGee could tell.

McGee was surprised to learn that Tony didn’t use credit much. In fact, Tony only had one credit card. After having his identity stolen not once but twice, McGee was beginning to see the wisdom in not having a lot of readily accessible credit. But it wasn’t something he’d ever thought a clothes horse like Tony, someone very into designer labels, would be willing or able to do.

It was only after he’d reviewed Tony’s spending habits that McGee realized the other man bought quality over quantity. He spent more per item, but bought less. McGee realized Tony’s extensive wardrobe had to be the byproduct of years of accumulation—not his living beyond his means. It made McGee a little embarrassed when realized his own spending spree after he’d sold his novel had been largely based on things Tony had said when it came to designer labels and where to shop. He’d spent more in a week than Tony had in six months.

Tony’s bank account was still open, but had been essentially inactive. He’d made a sizeable withdrawal the Monday he quit, but there was nothing else after that date. His last pay check was direct deposited two weeks after he’d turned in his resignation, but so far had remained untouched.

All Tony’s bills had been paid via automatic withdrawals from his account. And most of those had ceased with the termination of his lease on his apartment and when he cancelled most services. No more utility bills, no phone, no cable, no water, no rent. His landlord hadn’t even been upset that Tony was breaking his lease early since the owners of the building wanted to take it condo. He was already making plans to renovate Tony’s place to use it as a demo for future buyers.

Tony hadn’t filed any formal change of address with the Post Office. Not that it was really required. He’d only have to if he wanted things forwarded, and since all his bills were paid automatically, the only mail coming to his old address would be junk or magazines.

He hadn’t given a new address to the personnel department either. They only thing they would need to send him would be a W-2 for his taxes. That went to his accountant, and had ever since he started work at NCIS. The accountant hadn’t heard from Tony recently but said she didn’t expect to until the end of the year.

Putting out a BOLO on Tony’s car wasn’t even an option. Much to McGee’s chagrin he’d never given a thought to what Tony was driving since his Mustang had been blown up. He hadn’t even known what to put a BOLO on—and no one on the team knew either. They’d definitely dropped the ball on that one. He’d had to check the security footage of the parking lot to find out what Tony had been driving. It was a rental, and another dead end. He’d returned it the same way he had his cellphone.

“McGee.” Gibbs gave him a dark look, clearly impatient with the delay in getting an answer.

“Nothing new, Boss.” McGee resisted the urge to apologize. It was the same answer he’d been giving Gibbs for weeks, and it never got any easier.

Gibbs nodded once, and walked away, heading for the elevator. McGee tried to convince himself the slump
he could see in the older man’s shoulders was his imagination. He never saw Gibbs look tired or disappointed---but he suspected what he was seeing was what it would look like.

Ziva got up and approached him. “No luck?”

McGee shook his head. “No.”

“He did not fall off the head of the world.”

“Face of the world.” McGee corrected quietly. It had been Tony’s place to point out Ziva’s mistakes, and it felt odd each and every time he did it.

“Of course.” She smiled tiredly. Her voice dropped to little more than a whisper as her dark eyes shifted to look at Tony’s empty desk. “I miss him.”

“We all do.”

Ducky asked every morning about McGee’s progress the way Gibbs asked every night. Abby had Tony’s picture up on every monitor in her lab. Even Palmer looked lost.

Ziva sighed and nodded slowly. She gave him an uncertain look that was at odds with her usual confident approach. McGee waited, watching her warily.

“Did he…did he tell you why…in the note he left you?”

McGee swallowed hard. “No.”

But researching Tony’s life trying to find him had given McGee some hints as to why Tony might have walked away. While Gibbs was gone, and after he came back, then that mess with Jeanne---they hadn’t exactly given him reason to want to stay.

“Did he say anything in your note?” McGee asked. He’d seen her face when she read what Tony wrote. She’d looked like it hurt.

“No, he did not tell me why he quit.” She pursed her lips, expression grim. “Do you think he told Gibbs?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.” If Gibbs knew why Tony left, he’d probably know where he went too.

“Tony should have talked to us.”

McGee nodded, but silently disagreed. Tony had talked to them; they just hadn’t heard what he had to say. All the things McGee had learned about Tony since he’d left were things he should have known a long time ago. They were things all of them would have known if they’d paid attention. Hindsight made a lot of things clear that McGee hadn’t even been aware of before. Tony had told them more by walking away than they’d ever heard when he spoke directly to them. McGee hoped he’d get a chance to tell Tony he finally got the message.

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Tony lightly slapped the alarm turning off the music. He rolled out of bed without hesitation, navigating the predawn darkness with familiar ease. Months before leaving D.C. for Houston, Tony had settled into a routine of jogging at five in the morning. The only thing that had changed since he moved in with Joe and Levon was now he had company.

Tony and Joe usually covered five miles together every morning. It was nice to have someone to go with. It didn’t hurt that Joe would set a pace that was challenging without letting Tony over do it---something he’d been prone to while in D.C. Shortly before he’d left, as a way of dealing with his turbulent emotions, Tony had been running twice a day. Not only had all the stress and strenuous exercise had caused him to lose weight, but jogging in chilly autumn air had been hard on his plague damaged lungs. At least in Houston it was still warm enough that jogging outside wasn’t painful for him.

While they ran, Levon took care of his horses and chores around the barn. He normally finished before they did, and had breakfast waiting when Joe and Tony completed their run. Sometimes it was nothing more than homemade oatmeal, which Tony had found to be surprisingly good with fresh fruit. Sometimes it was bacon and eggs. Once in awhile Levon might make pancakes. But whatever he made, it was always good, and the shared meal never failed to add to Tony’s feeling of welcome. It also helped to put back on some of the weight he’d lost.

Tony going into work with Joe and Levon had been added to their daily routine three weeks ago. It had taken almost two months before Tony had secured a position with the Houston Police Department. He’d turned down Joe and Levon’s offer to use any influence they might have to ensure he got hired to fill a spot that recently opened up in their unit. He even went so far as to make them promise not to speak on his behalf when he applied, refusing to use them as references. Tony didn’t want anyone saying he’d only gotten the job because of them.

He wanted to get hired on his own merit---not like when Gibbs had gotten him a position at NCIS. He knew he’d only been hired because Gibbs wanted him on his team. It wasn’t like he’d actually applied for the job even though he had been thinking about leaving Baltimore. At the time, a federal position hadn’t really been something he’d set his sights on.

Tony had lost count of the number of NCIS agents who’d taken time out of their busy days to make sure he was fully aware that if it hadn’t been for Gibbs Tony wouldn’t have made the grade. For the first two years of his career at NCIS, Tony secretly feared Gibbs was prepared to cut him loose at a moments notice. He’d seen Vivian transferred with little or no warning, and Tony had no reason not think the same couldn’t happen to him.

When Gibbs hired Kate, and then McGee, his fear had intensified. They came with a far more specialized set of skills than Tony could lay claim to, and they’d been hired about the time Tony would have normally moved on to greener pastures. But he’d held his own, proving his worth and stayed.

After Gibbs left for Mexico, Tony realized he no longer owed his job to the man. He finally found the confidence in himself that should have always been there but hadn’t been. And everything that happened afterwards convinced Tony he didn’t owe Gibbs his loyalty either. Gibbs obviously didn’t trust Tony, so why the hell was he should he trust him? Rule 15 said they were supposed to always work as a team. And it had come to be just one more example of Gibbs’ wanting his team to do what he said but not what he did.

So Tony had gone through the lengthy hiring process for the Houston Police Department the way everyone
else did. He’d filled out the application, using a P.O. Box for an address rather than Joe and Levon’s place and the number from his newly acquired cellphone. At least on paper it wouldn’t look like he was living with them. Not that anyone would likely care, but to Tony it was the principal of the thing.

He proved his linguistics skills during his first interview. When the personnel clerk responsible for handling all initial applicant meetings had entered the room cursing to himself in Spanish, Tony had responded in the same language. The entire interview was ultimately conducted in Spanish. In Houston, with its large Latino population, being bilingual was nearly a requirement. It was certainly in Tony’s favor that he also spoke French, Italian and German—although not as fluently as he did Spanish.

Part of the application process, for anyone not already on the HPD payroll, was a mandated trip to the firing range. Tony had qualified on the shooting range with ease, using a Sig Sauer he borrowed Joe’s sizeable collection of handguns. He’d taken no small amount of pride in beating his own personal best. His score was in the top five for the range, losing out only to the snipers on SWAT and Levon. Levon held the top score for the department since earning his gold shield nearly ten years ago. It only made sense since that he would—he’d been handling firearms from the time his grandfather, a former Texas Ranger, thought he was big enough to hold one.

Tony was a little worried about not being able to list Gibbs as a reference. Given how he left, he didn’t think either Gibbs or Shepard would have much good to say about him. But it wasn’t uncommon not to list former supervisors when looking for a new job. Still, knowing some one to vouch for him and his time at NCIS would be helpful. So Tony bit the bullet and sent a brief e-mail, from an internet café, to Ducky and Michelle Lee asking if they would mind being character references for him. He also asked them not to mention his request to anyone else.

Not that he actually expected anyone else on the team to care, but he didn’t want Ducky or Michelle to take any heat for doing him a favor. It was the same reason he’d had numbers from the office and his teammate’s cellphones blocked from Levon and Joe’s home phone. Assuming the team bothered to try and track him down; their number would be a logical starting point since it was the last one he’d called. Tony didn’t want his former teammates to call and bother Joe and Levon, or leave nasty messages.

Not that they could leave messages any more. Three days after Tony had moved in, a passing thunderstorm and stray bolt of lightning had fried the answering machine. They hadn’t gotten around to replacing it yet. There was one message that had been lost, but they assumed if it was important whoever it was would call back.

Tony stretched, limbering up a bit before heading down the hall to meet Joe. Even with his skills and experience, Tony had thought getting the spot in Beaumont’s squad would be a long shot. Getting in on the Major Case Squad was considered a plum position and competition was fierce. But he thought his overall chances of getting in with the department were better than average so getting called back for a second interview hadn’t surprised him. He had, however, been absolutely stunned when Beaumont called to offer him a job on her squad after his second interview.

Tony enjoyed getting back into the swing of police work. It was nice to be once more doing something he felt he was good at. And he liked the people he worked with a lot. They had hazed him a little…good natured stuff about being another transplanted Yankee and Joe trying to slip more family in across the border, but for the most part, his addition to the team was met with an easy acceptance that Tony found a bit disconcerting—until his new partner, Roberto Mendez, had set him straight.

“Once Beaumont narrowed the choices down to four she found acceptable, she let everyone in the squad look at the candidates. We got to put in our two cents, and everyone thought you were the best guy for the job.” Roberto had laughed lightly. “Even before we found out you was related to that crazy gringo, LaFiamma.”
Tony grinned to himself, still pleased with that endorsement. It was nice to know his credentials had impressed them. God knows no one at NCIS ever thought much of what he’d accomplished.

He laughed softly thinking about Roberto. In spite of his Latino heritage, Roberto’s little wire rimmed glasses and studious demeanor had initially reminded Tony of McGee. But Roberto was no geek, and he spoke his mind without hesitation—something McGee had rarely done. Roberto also had several tattoos hidden under his clothes that were leftovers from when he was in a gang as a teenager. He had the most obvious ones removed when he started to give being a cop serious consideration. His sly wit worked well with Tony’s own off beat sense of humor, and he played a mean game of basketball.

Three weeks hadn’t been much of a test yet, but Tony had a feeling he and Roberto were going to do fine together. If nothing else, Roberto seemed like a dependable guy. He had plenty of experience of his own to draw on, solid street smarts and a willingness to work with Tony. It was certainly a nice change from the competition that had always existed between Tony, McGee and Ziva.

It didn’t hurt that the rest of the squad looked out for each other too. Beaumont had regular briefings so that each team on the squad knew the basics and rate of progress on each others’ cases. If they came across anything in their own investigations that might be linked to another case, it was much easier to recognize it and then pass it along. Or if back up was needed, it took far less time to bring them up to speed on what was going on. Tony appreciated that her system lessened the chances of what happened to Pacci, who’d been killed while working a cold case no one else had known about, would happen on Beaumont’s watch. And he really liked that it made his getting to know the other detectives far easier than anywhere else he’d worked.

“You ready to go, Tony?” Joe asked from where he was stretching out in front of the stone fireplace.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Was thinking we should pick up the pace today. Maybe add another mile.” Joe smiled. “You up for it?”

“Definitely.” Tony grinned. Whenever Joe wanted to increase the pace and add distance, it meant he talked Levon into making something very carb heavy for breakfast. Tony was betting on waffles. Joe had a real weakness for them, especially when covered in strawberries. He tended to eat more than he considered good for himself. Tony would tease him about it if he didn’t have a similar weakness.

Eventually, Tony was going to have to find a place of his own. He couldn’t stay in their guest room forever, but for now, he was going to enjoy the benefits of living with Joe and Levon to the fullest.

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Gibbs sipped his bourbon, wincing at the greater than usual burn it caused in his mouth. He’d bit the inside of his cheek when Corporal Worth had belted him in the gym and the abused tissue was still a bit raw. His sore ribs protested when he moved, reminding him they hadn’t appreciated being slammed up against the wall.

Subduing Worth had been a lot harder than Gibbs expected. He’d taken on Gibbs, McGee and Ziva without even breaking much of a sweat. Having a fourth might well have made a difference. As it was, it had taken the added assistance of two orderlies and a recovering Marine to pin Worth down and sedate him.

Gibbs shook his head. McGee had sustained a concussion, a broken wrist and cracked three ribs. Ziva had also gotten a minor concussion and a broken nose out of the deal, but at least she could say she gave as good as she got. Worth sported a few bruises from her boots that wouldn’t fade quickly.

With McGee unable to type at his usual speed, Gibbs been forced to call in reinforcements to do the computer stuff for the investigation. Agent Lee had worked as McGee’s hands, typing and searching under
his direction. She’d worked well enough, but Gibbs didn’t still didn’t see her as material for his team. She was too timid.

He frowned, thinking about her. Several times it had been like she was on the verge of saying something to him, only to walk away whenever anyone else showed up. He suspected she wanted another shot at being a field agent, but if she didn’t have balls enough to simply ask him she wouldn’t cut it in the field.

Getting a moment alone with her, Gibbs all but ordered her to just spit it out, snapping at her harshly. For a moment she’d actually seemed to shrink away from him, eyes overly bright, but she rallied, raising her chin, dark eyes meeting his defiantly. She told him, with calm deliberation, that she was sorry if she had done anything to offend him. He didn’t entirely believe her apology was the reason she’d want to talk to him, but he felt like a heel for nearly making her cry, so he just nodded and told her to get back to work.

Getting Abby to work on the case hadn’t been easy either. Ever since Kate’s death, Abby tended to go a little nuts when it came to the safety of the others so she took it personally that Worth had hurt everyone on the team. She did not like reminders of their mortality.

Gibbs understood her fear of losing another teammate. And he hated that her fear was well grounded when it came to the dangerous nature of their jobs---Pacci, Kate, and Paula had all died in the line of duty. Not to mention the very real fear not that long ago Tony might have been added to the list. Tony’s quitting and simply vanishing hadn’t help to alleviate Abby’s fears any---but Gibbs couldn’t condone her thinking of a Marine as little better than a rabid dog in need of a permanent solution. Worth was a soldier, damn it, and a good one. It was their duty to find out what had happened to him. He was glad Ducky had been able to convince Abby to work on the case. Gibbs was sure she’d have done it if he ordered her too…but he didn’t want it to come to that.

Karen Sutherland had been very helpful with eliminating possible drug testing by her company. Gibbs grimaced as he pictured the woman. She was pretty. Tony could have probably charmed the pants off her and gotten her to help a lot faster. Well, the old Tony would have, Gibbs amended. The others might not think he noticed, but he was aware that after Jeanne, Tony didn’t flirt the way he used to.

As it was, Gibbs was forced to play on Sutherland’s conscience, hoping like hell she really had one. It was a lucky break she really meant what she said about trying to help people. It was a shame that her company wasn’t doing any drug testing to make super soldiers. It would have made for a much nicer ending to Worth’s situation.

Gibbs smiled wryly. Tony would have loved Sutherland’s lab. It was full of all sorts of gizmos and toys that would have been right at home in any of the younger man’s favorite Bond movies.

Gibbs sighed. His gaze drifted to the metal box that now sat on top of his work bench. Tony was the first and only person he’d ever charged with the job of keep his medals. He’d never told Tony that. Gibbs had just handed him the box and told him to keep it in a safe place. Would it have made a difference to Tony if he’d known? Gibbs took another sip of his drink. He had now way of knowing, but he had a feeling it would have.

Worth would never get a medal. Not officially. Steroid abuse just didn’t look good for the Marine Corps and the Senator any better than it did for Major League Baseball. Gibbs snorted. He wished he’d had the chance to smack that schmuck of an aid around just a little.

Gibbs took another sip of his drink. If Worth had doped himself for some selfish gain, Gibbs would never have found his actions excusable. But as it was, Gibbs understood the kid wasn’t trying to be a hero, he just wanted to be a Marine. The shame of it was, he had been a good one. He really was a credit to the Corps and had saved the lives of several of his fellow soldiers. So Gibbs had left his medal for Worth. He wanted
him to know at least one person believed he’d earned it.

Gibbs sighed. He should have done something like that for Tony. Made some effort to acknowledge how proud he was of him, how good an agent he was. It galled him to have to admit to himself Shepard had been right—he hadn’t treated Tony with the respect he deserved, or shown him how much he was trusted. He had no right to be surprised the younger man had finally had enough. Tony wasn’t a dog, no matter how much he might seem like one at times—he wouldn’t stand around forever waiting for what tidbit of praise or acknowledgement Gibbs might toss his way. His loyalty wasn’t unconditional.

Gibbs never thought Tony would just walk away…or manage to elude being found so easily. Tony knew how they worked. If he wanted to hide, he had an inside track on how to do it. The strange thing was that Gibbs’ gut was telling him Tony never expected them to look, so his vanishing act probably hadn’t been deliberate.

Gibbs suspected it was a byproduct of how Tony lived his life. Being prepared to go under cover at a moment’s notice, or pick up and leave whenever the mood struck him. Until coming to NCIS, Tony hadn’t put down roots…and he acted like he hadn’t wanted or needed them. Gibbs was reminded of something Ducky had told him not long after hiring Tony.

They were both standing on the platform above the bullpen. DiNozzo was the only one working. His head was bent over some case file.
“‘He’s like you, Jethro, in many ways.”’ Ducky had observed quietly.

“‘You say that like it’s a bad thing.”’ Gibbs had smirked.

“‘Not at all, dear boy.”’ Ducky had smiled. “‘But what makes him interesting is where you and he differ.”

“‘Oh?” Gibbs had asked, arching an eyebrow.

“‘You never doubted yourself. In all the time I’ve known you. He does.”

“‘Doubts will get you killed.”’ Gibbs had declared firmly, not liking Ducky’s assessment. He’d seen people second guess themselves into immobility.

“‘They can,” Ducky had agreed. “‘But leaping in where angels fear to tread will do the same.”

The ME had turned to look him in the eye. “‘It is hard to learn anything when you think you already have all the answers. Mostly because you stop looking for what you think you have already found.” Ducky had nodded to where Tony sat. “‘That one…his doubts will serve him well. They will not cause him to freeze, but rather will keep him mobile and searching.”

“‘Not a bad trait in an investigator.”

“‘True.” Ducky had nodded, patting Gibbs on the arm. “‘But it isn’t just answers to your cases he’ll be looking for.”

Gibbs suddenly understood what Ducky had been trying to tell him then. He sighed deeply. He put down his glass, and walked to his latest project.
Gibbs eyed the skeleton of his new boat. This one was just over two months into construction. The day Tony had quit, Gibbs had come home and destroyed the previous one in a fit of rage. He’d taken a sledge hammer to it, hitting it over and over until there was little more than shards and splinters left. He burned it all in the backyard.
Gibbs began sanding with slow and deliberate motions. He was tired and his body ached, but sleep would
be a long time coming. It hadn’t come easy since Tony quit. He kept thinking about everything he should have done differently, questions should have asked, answers he hadn’t known were missing.

Gibbs smiled tiredly. He would have to talk to Ducky tomorrow. The older man had known Tony better the day he met him than Gibbs did after nearly seven years working with him. Maybe he’d have some idea of where Tony had gone. God knows the rest of them weren’t having much luck.
Ducky hummed quietly to himself as he walked into the morgue. He cursed when he realized the tune he was humming was the Jeopardy theme song. After months without watching it, his mother was once more obsessed with the game show. It wouldn’t be so bad, Ducky mused to himself, if she didn’t watch the same episode over and over. When the show challenged him, Ducky hadn’t minded it much. But now he knew all the answers it was boring, and he had come to think of it as just so much background noise. Ducky shook his head. Clearly the show had burrowed more deeply into his psyche than he’d realized if he was unconsciously humming the theme song.

“I think a cup of tea is in order.”

He had a cup every morning, whenever his schedule allowed for it. And today, he could definitely use some fortification. Ducky shook his head. Maybe tonight his mother would at least be willing to watch a new episode.

Ducky put the kettle on the small hot plate he kept in his office for just that purpose and powered up his computer. He logged on and checked his e-mail. He was hoping for another missive from Tony.

He had been thrilled when he received a brief message several weeks ago, delighted to have finally heard from Tony---at least he was until he’d read through what Tony had to say. Having confirmation Tony was looking for a position in law enforcement elsewhere meant he truly wasn’t coming back. Not that Ducky genuinely expected Tony would, but he’d hoped he might.

Quitting so suddenly had seemed rather unlike Tony. Even when he’d left his previous jobs, the younger man had always given two week notice. It wasn’t entirely against his nature to be impulsive, but Ducky suspected Tony hadn’t made the jump entirely unaided. In spite of everything that had happened, or perhaps because of it, Ducky thought Tony would have talked to someone before making any sort of decision---and he probably had. But it wasn’t one of the team, or at least, Ducky didn’t think so. Given the extensive and exhaustive search they were undertaking, he couldn’t imagine Abby, McGee, Ziva or Gibbs telling Tony leaving would be the right choice. Nor could he see them putting so much effort into finding him if any of them thought his leaving was truly the right choice.

Ducky saw Tony asking him to keep quiet about his being in contact as further proof he was serious about cutting all ties. It saddened Ducky. He’d thought Tony had found a place for himself at NCIS. He’d thought NCIS and the team had succeeded in giving Tony a sense of purpose, stability and family. But with everything that had happened over the last year and a half, Ducky realized they had failed, or more likely had damaged the relationship to the point Tony no long believed he had any reason to remain in D.C. with NCIS or the team.

Ducky had debated with himself for several days whether or not to stay silent about Tony asking him to be a reference for a job in Houston. The others may not have been able to show Tony they cared to the degree he’d needed, but it was obvious to Ducky they were worried about him. It didn’t feel right to keep what he knew a secret. But ultimately, Ducky decided to say nothing about Tony’s communication with him. He’d already let the younger man down several times---not speaking up for him more when he was acting team leader, not paying attention when Tony clearly needed a friend he could talk to and rely on, not expressing more concern for his health and well being---the list was far too long. He owed it to Tony to honor his request, and Ducky couldn’t in good conscience betray what might be a final display of trust.

Ducky hadn’t expected his silence to make that much difference. He honestly thought the others would be capable of tracking Tony down by now. It was what they did for a living after all. But every morning when Ducky asked McGee about their progress the answer was always the same, nothing. Being unable to track Tony down was either a case of them not trying as hard as Ducky had believed they were, or Tony was far
better at covering his tracks than anyone would have expected.

When Lieutenant Joanne Beaumont called to check out Tony’s references Ducky never even considered lying. Tony was a friend, and had asked him in good faith to speak on his behalf. He wasn’t going to be anything less than honest. Tony had been a good agent, and would be an asset to any organization he worked for. Ducky wished him the best in Houston. Tony deserved to be happy, and it was obvious he hadn’t been happy in D.C. for months.

He had been elated that Tony continued to send him infrequent e-mails. The short messages reassured him that Tony was okay. From the most recent e-mail, sent last week, it sounded as though Tony was settling into a life in Houston. He was staying with friends until he found a place of his own. He’d gotten the job and had been assigned a partner who sounded like a good man. And the warmer weather was a nice change from the bite of winter that had been hitting D.C when Tony left.

Ducky reviewed his inbox, hoping for a new message. He sighed, disappointed to find nothing. He hadn’t really expected there to be one given Tony’s dislike for communicating via e-mail, but he’d hoped for an update.

Tony’s e-mails were far too short to really give Ducky all the details he wanted. He’d suggested Tony simply call him at home if calling the office or his cellphone was an issue for him but Tony had vetoed the idea. The time zone difference and their respective work schedules practically guaranteed talking to one another wouldn’t happen at a reasonable hour. And Tony worried about disturbing Mrs. Mallard. The younger man knew she didn’t sleep well, which meant Ducky often didn’t get much sleep either.

The whistle of the kettle interrupted Ducky’s thoughts. He poured out a cup, letting the Earl Gray steep. He got up to check the small refrigerator, grimacing when he realized he’d forgotten to buy more cream.

“Damn.” Ducky preferred his tea light and sweet, much the way Tony liked it. It wasn’t particularly healthy, but Ducky thought his one indulgence was relatively minor. He chuckled. Tony could hardly claim sweet tea was his only indulgence. When he first started at NCIS there were days when Ducky was almost certain Tony lived entirely on candy from the vending machine. It was a wonder he had any teeth at all much less such a beautiful smile.

Ducky looked up at the sound of the automatic doors opening. He smiled warmly in welcome. “Good morning, Jethro.”

“Morning, Duck.” Gibbs handed him a half pint of cream.

“Bless you, my boy.” Ducky took the proffered cream gratefully. “I keep forgetting to buy more on my way in.”

“I know.” Gibbs smirked. “Did you just go without when I wasn’t around or learn to drink it black?”

“Neither.” Ducky poured a healthy dollop into his tea. “Tony brought it for me.”

“He did?”

“You needn’t sound so surprised.” Ducky looked up from stirring in a large spoonful of sugar. “Tony took good care of everyone in your absence.”

“Yeah…I heard he did a good job.”

Ducky stifled a snort, wondering who had told Gibbs that. It wasn’t like Ziva, McGee or Abby would have
said as much. All they wanted was for him to be Gibbs. And there was really no way he could be, no matter how hard Tony tried. And any time he did anything his own way, they ridiculed him. Ducky thought the campfires were actually a good way to keep everyone, not just field agents, in the loop. He could listen to the CD’s Abby burned or read the transcripts and be as up to speed on the details of the case as everyone else. It was a rather novel experience and he found he missed it.

He was ashamed of himself for letting his own anger at Gibbs get in the way of being able to sing his praise of Tony’s time as acting team leader. He could barely talk to Gibbs then. And now, well, now it seemed too little too late. Ducky sighed softly. He had so much to apologize for.

“Duck?”

“Yes?” Ducky sipped his tea. He raised both eyebrows, surprised when Gibbs didn’t immediately speak further. It wasn’t like him to hesitate.

“Did Tony tell you why he left?”

“Not really, no.” Ducky pursed his lips. Tony’s letter, like his e-mails had been brief, but heartfelt. Tony mentioned how proud he was to have been able to work with such an esteemed man; a sentiment that, when he thought about it, made Ducky blush. He’d apologized for leaving so abruptly, but said he thought drawn out good-byes were best left to the movies. ‘In real life, they just make everything harder than it needed to be.’ He said he always thought of Ducky as a friend, and hoped Ducky thought of him the same way.

The silly boy, Ducky thought fondly. They might not have the same extensive history Ducky shared with Gibbs, but Tony was most definitely someone he considered a friend. And honestly, he should be the one asking Tony if he still wanted to be friends.

“Not really…what does that mean?” Gibbs made a ‘go on’ motion with one hand. “He gave you a hint? Wrote his life story? What?”

“He didn’t spell it out, Jethro.” Ducky resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “But looking back…well, suffice it to say, I noticed things in hindsight I should have seen before, so when I reread his letter, I have to say I better understand now why he left.”

Ducky looks at Gibbs. “I gather he didn’t say much in his letter to you?”

“No.” Gibbs shook his head. “Did you profile him?”

Ducky sighed, nodding. It hadn’t been intentional. It was more of an occupational hazard. The second he realized Tony had quit, Ducky had reviewed everything he knew about Tony…and everything he thought he knew, everything they had on file, and every picture he could find. He thought it would help the team to locate Tony. It had been…enlightening.

“All idea where he is?”

Ducky hesitated. Lying was never something he had ever been good at. And up until now, he hadn’t had to lie---no one had ever asked him outright if he knew where Tony had gone or why.

The delay was his undoing. Gibbs’ gaze sharpened. The former Marine advanced on him, stepping into his space. Icy blue eyes held Ducky in place.

“He’s been in touch with you. Hasn’t he?”
Ducky’s chin came up, defiant in the face of Gibbs’ hostility. Blue eyes met blue. “Yes.”

“How long?” Gibbs growled. “How long have you known where he is?”

“A few weeks,” Ducky admitted quietly.

“Weeks!!” Gibbs snarled. “Why the hell didn’t you say something?”

“Because he asked me not to.” Ducky kept his tone deliberately mild, forcing himself to sound calm.

Gibbs turned away from him, hand slamming into the wall. He spun back around to face Ducky. “Of all the —”

“Don’t you dare!” Ducky raised a hand in warning, eyes flashing with anger. “I would not betray the trust of one friend for the sake of another. And you have no right to expect me to.”

“Damn it, Duck, this isn’t about trust.”

“The hell it isn’t.” Ducky set his cup down, restraining himself enough not to slam it on to his desk. “Had you asked me to hold my tongue for you, and I failed to do so, you’d have seen it as a betrayal. Don’t think for one second Tony wouldn’t see it the same way. You know as well as I do, he is very much like you.”

“We’ve been friends for—”

“I know exactly how long we have been friends,” Ducky cut him off sharply. “That I have been friends with Tony for less time does not change my obligation to him.”

“What about the rest of the team? What about what you owe them?”

Ducky refused to show Gibbs had scored a hit with those questions. He had wanted to tell the others, to ease the worry and pain he saw in them. It was a large part of his own personal debate on whether or not to honor Tony’s request.

“Tony had no right to ask you to keep quiet.”

“He had every right.” Ducky squared his shoulders. “It is his life, Jethro.”

“His life is here.”

“No, his life was here.” Ducky shook his head. “He is not a child who ran away from home, Jethro. Tony is an adult. He made his choice, and as painful as we may find that to be, it was his decision to make.”

“He made the wrong one.”

“Possibly.” Ducky could concede that much. “But it isn’t your place to judge.”

“Excuse me?”

“May I remind you, it wasn’t all that long ago you made the same choice.”

Gibbs’ jaw clenched. “I had better reasons.”

“How would you know?” Ducky snorted, more annoyed than angry at Gibbs’ display of ego. “You don’t
know why he left.”

Gibbs opened his mouth and then snapped his jaw shut with an audible click. Ducky waited, unsure of how the other man would respond. It wouldn’t be out of character for him to just storm out of the morgue. He’d given Ducky the cold shoulder before, and Ducky had returned the favor on occasion. After fifteen years, it was safe to say they’d covered a lot of ground in their friendship.

Gibbs took a deep breath and released it slowly. “You won’t tell me where he is?”

“I cannot tell you that.” Ducky was unprepared for the look of devastation that briefly graced Gibbs’ features.

“How am I supposed to fix this Duck when I can’t find him?”

Well, hell, Ducky cursed silently. He couldn’t tell Gibbs where Tony was, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t point him in the right direction. Help him find what he should have found on his own. Someone other than Ducky should have already looked there anyway. It was just another example of the team thinking they knew Tony better than they really did.

“Go pull his personnel file.”

“Why?”

Ducky gave Gibbs a look that was a virtual head slap. “I think you might find some worthwhile information if you check the emergency contact and next of kin information.”

“But I am hi--“

“You were once. You aren’t any longer.” Ducky was still angry enough to add another verbal jab. “As Tony astutely pointed out, it made no sense to have an emergency contact no one could get in touch with.”

“I left a number,” Gibbs shot back indignantly.

“Not with Tony you didn’t.” Ducky gave Gibbs another hard look. “And calling a damn bar would hardly have been reassuring for any of us if Tony had been bleeding his life out on an operating table.”

Gibbs had the good grace to blush. “Mike didn’t have a phone.”

“And a cellphone would clearly have been too much trouble for you to get,” Ducky shot back dryly.

Gibbs looked away. “I wasn’t planning on coming back.”

“And the only reason you’d need it would be because of the job?” Ducky snorted. Honestly the man was so dense some days.

Ducky smiled tightly. “The only people who actually believed that you truly meant to quit and stay away were you and Tony. Yet another reason for him to update the contact information.”

“He didn’t change it back.”

It was more of a question than a statement, so Ducky answered. “No, he didn’t.”

“Why?”
“You’d have to ask him that question.”

“I asked you.”

Ducky grimaced. Pigheaded bastard. He wanted an answer. Ducky would give him one.

“I’m only guessing, but I’d say it was because, Jethro, you showed you could crack. Which meant you might well shatter. And he couldn’t trust you to be there when he needed you. Even someone as comfortable on shaky ground as Tony needs something solid he can depend on.”

Gibbs gave him an unreadable look. Ducky stared back, unperturbed. The man had demanded a response; it wasn’t Ducky’s fault if he hadn’t liked the answer.

“His personnel file?”

“Yes.” Ducky dipped his head.

Gibbs nodded. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He wished Gibbs the best of luck. Ducky had come to terms with Tony’s leaving…at least as much as he was able, but the others certainly hadn’t. They were all in need of some closure. And that couldn’t happen without a chance to talk to Tony. Of course, having the chance to speak didn’t mean the right things would get said. Ducky superstitiously crossed his fingers and sent a small prayer heavenward, hoping for the best.
Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Abby walked into the lab, turning on the lights before dropping her bag in her office. She turned on the stereo as she walked toward her computer. The music playing was an instrumental smooth jazz CD she’d picked up because it was one she knew Tony would have enjoyed. While it wasn’t what she’d have preferred, but it had grown on her over the weeks and months Tony had been gone. And playing music her missing teammate liked was one way for her to feel closer to him.

She knew Ziva had signed up for an online American Cinema class at Georgetown University for the same reason. Both women were stunned when a review of the course syllabus and curriculum revealed both had been written by Tony DiNardo. He really had taught there.

Abby sighed. They’d sold Tony short thinking a cover of him as a college professor was a joke, that he couldn’t have really pulled it off. From the looks of the material Ziva had gotten when she enrolled, Tony was more than competent to teach classes on a subject he was clearly well versed in. She owed him an apology. Abby had known him longer than Ziva or McGee. She'd known he was far more than a dumb jock; she should have known he could pull off acting like a professor if the situation called for it.

Abby sighed again, and took a large sip of her Caf-Pow. She should get to work, but her eyes strayed to the presents that still languished under glass, unopened. She knew whatever Tony had gotten her would no doubt be perfect---something she'd love to have. Tony was very good at finding gifts to suit her tastes.

She'd nearly opened it that Monday morning, before she'd known Tony had quit. She'd grinned in delight the moment she'd seen it, eager to find out what was in the unexpected gift. She'd initially thought it was from Gibbs. But seeing the letter that had been under it, with her name written in Tony's distinctive scrawl, she quickly realized her mistake.

She'd frowned, suddenly uneasy. Tony didn't get her -just because' gifts---or at least not the kind that warranted wrapping. A Caf-Pow or candy he wouldn't hesitate to give her, but the wrapping suggested something far more formal. It wasn't her birthday, no anniversary that she was aware of, no reason he should go to extraordinary lengths.

She'd warily set aside the small box to read his letter. The note was brief, but more than long enough to leave Abby torn between wanting to smack Tony and wanting to cry.

How could he just leave? Didn't he understand how important he was to her, to the team? It was selfish of him to just walk away. Coward, she'd wanted to yell at him. He should have talked to her face to face. They needed him. Didn't he understand that?

-How can you expect him to know he is important when you treated him as though he wasn't?' A little voice inside her argued. She'd flinched from the thought, only to have her excellent memory tally up examples and present them for her to review.

Sure she'd hugged him when he came back from being out with the plague, but she'd never gone to see him in the hospital or at his home. She’d never really thanked him saving McGee and Kate when the care blew up, or for saving her life when Ari was firing shots into her lab. She apologized for nearly putting him in jail for murder when Chip framed him by sending him black roses---a gift he would hardly appreciate and more than a week late.

She’d gone to Ziva's dinner party with the rest of the team, knowing Tony hadn't been invited, and gloated about what he’d missed. She'd kept Gibbs' picture up in her lab, creating a shrine to him, not thinking how it might seem to Tony who had the difficult task of trying to fill the older man's shoes. She gave Ziva Gibbs' number when the Mossad Agent was in trouble rather telling her to talk to Tony.
She'd yelled at him over those stupid rumors about her taking another job when she knew he wasn't the one who started spreading them. She was guilty of doing that—telling several people in the building about her dinner with the headhunter, curious as to what they'd say about it. Abby never asked him if he was okay when Paula died, and she knew how close he was to her. She hadn't told him about her crazy stalker boyfriend. She didn't mention Jeanne, preferring to act like nothing had happened when it was obvious Tony was hurting. She was angry at him for keeping secrets and chose to not to make his dealing with getting over Jeanne any easier. Abby hadn't even asked him what car he was driving after the Mustang got blown up.

Abby swallowed hard. She always thought Tony understood she loved him like a brother. But she'd never actually said so...and Tony was the kind of guy who needed to hear the words, otherwise he saw only the negative side of people's actions. And what Abby's actions indicated was that she liked him well enough, enjoyed his company and conversation, but he wasn't irreplaceable or precious to her—certainly not in the same league as Gibbs.

"You are precious to me, Tony," Abby whispered to herself.

She eyed the still wrapped present she'd gotten for Tony. She'd nearly thrown it away when she'd realized her reason for getting it was something of a slight against Tony. It was a thank you for saving Gibbs, for keeping the boss man alive—not a gesture of appreciation for his bravery or a glad he was okay gift. Not that she hadn't felt those things too, but they weren't mentioned in the note she'd written in the card she'd intended to include. Realizing the card didn't say anything she should have said, she threw it away, but she couldn't bring herself to actually throw out the paperweight. It was still a good gift for Tony—one she fully intended to give him when she saw him.

She reached out a finger to lightly brush the glass beakers covering both presents. Abby didn't want to think of Tony's gift as the last thing she'd ever get from him. But if it was, she never wanted to open it.

Sighing heavily, she took another huge sip of her first Caf-Pow of the day. It was time to get to work and quit daydreaming. Abby pulled up the facial recognition program she had been running since Tony left. Given that the last place Tony had gone before quitting was Houston and the number on his home phone with a Houston area code, Abby had narrowed the focus of the search to Texas.

After reviewing the surveillance footage with Ziva, Abby didn't think 'Joe' was a felon or terrorist or anything other than a friend. She wasn't sure if he was a frat brother or not—he could have been. But careful review of the tapes showed he was packing heat. The jacket was well tailored and would have hid it from most people, but Abby could tell he was armed. If he was licensed to carry, and Abby was pretty sure he would be since Tony wasn't the sort to hang out with guys who went around armed for no good reason, she had the system scanning all federal and local law enforcement.

She blinked when the screen flashed 'match found'. Abby stared at it in stunned surprise. She had grown used to a daily report of nothing. There were a lot of faces to compare 'Joe' with, and the images they'd gotten were far from ideal.

Abby frantically typed, eagerly asking for details. She grinned when a name popped up. "Gotcha."

"Abby."

"Gibbs!!" She whirled around. Abby had no idea how he knew when she had something, but so far the only explanation that fit was magic. "I've got a name. The guy who came in with Tony. He's--"

"Joseph LaFiamma."
Abby stared at him. "How do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"What do you know about him?"

Abby spun back to her computer. She put LaFiamma's picture up on the screen. Most people looked like they were coming off a three day bender in their ID photo, but like Tony, Joe was an exception to the rule. Dark hair, turquoise eyes, regular features, nice smile. Abby gave his picture a dirty look. He had no business looking good when he'd taken Tony away.

"He's a cop with the Houston Police Department. He transferred from Chicago about six years ago." Abby frowned. There was a flag on the file. She dug a little deeper. "It looks like the FBI might have been interested in him at one point."

"Why?"

Abby pursed her lips in a silent whistle. "His family is one of the Families."

"Mafia?" Gibbs sounded surprised.

"Looks that way." Abby nodded. "According to the OCB, his uncle, Michael LaFiamma made Capo a year before Joseph LaFiamma left Chicago."

Gibbs frowned. "Did Joe get sent to Houston because of the family connection?"

"From what I can access here, staying in Chicago would probably have gotten him killed, but not because he was dirty or involved with the mob in any way. A rival family put a hit out on him when an investigation got a bit too close for comfort." Abby frowned, reading further. "It looks like Joe's uncle might have intervened...although, nothing I am finding explains how that got him sent to Houston. And I'm not sure why his uncle would have bothered to help at all. According to this," she pointed at the screen, "Joe was disowned by the family when he became a cop. He wasn't in direct contact with any of them for years before he left Chicago and hasn't been in touch since."

"Probably wasn't about helping him." Gibbs took a sip from his ever present cup of coffee. "Was likely more about saving face. Especially if Michael LaFiamma had to show he was in charge. It wouldn't look good for him to just let a rival off his nephew, even if he didn't want anything to do with Joe."

"Godfather stuff." Abby nodded. She didn't know if the movie was anything like the reality or not, but it was her only frame of reference.

"What else can you tell me?"

"Not much." Abby gave her computer screen a dirty look. "I'll have to dig deeper."

"Then do it."

Abby frowned. "I might have to do some hacking." OCB and the FBI weren't fond of just sharing information because she asked nicely.
"You need McGee?"

Abby didn't like admitting she couldn't handle things alone. But this was Tony...and he'd gone off with some Mafia Don's nephew. And it was the first real clue they'd gotten to where Tony might be.

"I could use him," Abby finally said.

"I'll send him down when he gets in."

"How did you know about LaFiamma?" Abby asked abruptly, before Gibbs could leave, making eye contact and holding it. For months they had nothing and Gibbs just walked into her lab with a name. She trusted his gut, and had unswerving faith in Gibbs, but if he knew who -Joe' was for months and was just now giving her a name, Abby was going to screw up his computer for the rest of his life.

"I checked Tony's personnel file this morning." Gibbs held up the folder he'd been holding when he walked in. "Joseph LaFiamma is listed as Tony's next of kin and emergency contact."

Abby blinked, shaking her head. That couldn't be right. Gibb had always been the one listed there. "Since when?"

"Joseph LaFiamma was listed as Tony's next of kin and emergency contact when he started at NCIS. He changed it after his first year to me." Gibbs looked away, his expression vaguely guilty. "He changed it back to LaFiamma when I went to Mexico."

Abby bit her lower lip. Tony had been with Gibbs for months before she'd really warmed up to him, so she hadn't really talked to him much, certainly not enough to know anyone else was ever listed as family. And for years, whenever personnel requested an update to their forms, Abby knew Tony just turned his in with a note saying nothing had changed. She knew he'd listed Gibbs as his next of kin at some point, but had never given much thought as to when. She'd just assumed he'd always had Gibbs listed. It never occurred to her he might have had someone else or acted to change it when Gibbs left. Although in hindsight it should have. Tony had gotten injured often enough on the job that not having someone who could speak for him in an emergency would have been seriously stupid.

"Did he say what his relationship to Joe was?" She was hesitant to ask. Gibbs wasn't usually forthcoming when it came to sharing information. Usually he just asked her for answers, he didn't often give them.

"He's a cousin." Gibbs flipped open the folder, and pulled out a form, offering to Abby.

Abby took it. There were three phone numbers listed for Joe—one was the number she'd called and left a message. The other two, Abby didn't recognize. One was listed as a cellphone, and the other as a work number. Another emergency of contact was listed if Joe wasn't available, Levon Lundy. She made a note of the name. Two of the numbers matched those under Joe's name. Levon Lundy didn't have any filial connection, at least not that Tony had written in, but she'd check him out too just to be on the safe side.

Abby frowned. "Why didn't Tony's connection to a crime family come up when you hired him? Shouldn't that have been in his background check?"

"His financial records were clean. Everything was accounted for. Other than a small trust fund from his grandmother, there was no hint he was receiving anything from the family coffers." Gibbs grimaced. "Tony never received a dime from his father. He wasn't even claimed as a dependant after he graduated from high school. There was no reason for me to question where his old man might be getting his money since Tony wasn't getting any of it."
Abby remembered Tony saying he’d been cut off when he was twelve, but she always thought he was exaggerating. Like they’d just cut his allowance for awhile, but what Gibbs said confirmed it hadn't been exactly what Tony implied—he’d completely cut off from any of the wealth the DiNozzo family laid claim to.

Gibbs sighed softly. "Tony hasn't been in contact with his father since he left home for Ohio State. His mother died when he was ten. He has no siblings. There wasn't any need to dig deeper into his background to check for extended family."

Abby nodded slowly, hearing what Gibbs hadn't said. There was no immediate need, but he should have done it anyway. He'd acted as if Tony was an orphan. And for all intents and purposes, Tony was an orphan which made Abby feel worse for not treating him better—they were his family.

"I want everything you can find on Joseph LaFiamma in an hour." Gibbs handed her the personnel file. "Tell McGee to go through Tony's file and look for-"

Gibbs cellphone rang, cutting him off. He opened it with a growl. Abby hoped whatever it was about was important or whoever was calling was probably going to wish he hadn't.

Gibbs listened for a minute, nodding once. "We'll be there in twenty. Tell them to secure the scene and not to touch anything."

Gibbs snapped the phone shut. "We've got a dead Marine not far from a mosque. You'll have to make do without McGee."

Abby nodded. She could do it. She wouldn't be as fast on her own, but it could still be done.

"I'll have something when you get back."

Gibbs gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Abby."

Abby went back to work. She needed to think positively. They were going to find Tony. When they did, she’d apologize. The rest of the team would apologize too. He would accept, after making them grovel a little. And everything would go back to normal---just like it had when Gibbs came back from Mexico.

Back to index
Tony strapped on his lightweight Kevlar vest, making sure his shoulder holster fit comfortably and his Glock was within easy reach. After trying out Joe’s, Tony found he liked the weight and feel of the Austrian pistol. It was a solid, serviceable piece and worked well as a replacement for the handgun he’d given back to Shepard.

He slipped two extra clips in his belt. He hoped he wouldn’t need them, but wanting to be prepared just in case. He secured his back up ankle piece, brushing down his right pant leg.

Roberto Mendez arched a dark eyebrow, brown eyes measuring Tony. “You lethal enough yet, DiNozzo?”

“All about.” Tony grinned, slipping a knife into a sheath strapped to his left calf, and checking to make sure the small blade hidden in his belt buckle was still secure. It was probably more than he needed but after everything he’d seen at NCIS, Tony had learned one could never be too prepared.

“And I thought LaFiamma packed a lot of heat.” Roberto shook his head, chuckling. “You are a walking arsenal, amigo.”

“Prior planning prevents poor performance, Mendez.” Tony shrugged one shoulder. It was probably more than he needed but after everything he’d seen at NCIS, Tony had learned it was better to be ready for anything. And given what they were gearing up for, the added weapons didn’t really constitute too much.

They were going out to bring in a local gang leader, Jesus Rodriguez. He was wanted for murder of four young women. They were all raped, strangled and left in alleys deep in a rival gang’s territory. It wasn’t until the third victim that they had any evidence point the finger in Rodriguez’s general direction. It took a fourth to get DNA and fingerprints that confirmed it was him. With that in hand, getting an arrest warrant was easy to do.

At NCIS, Gibbs would have gone after Rodriguez before the last victim had been killed---but Tony doubted even Gibbs could have made the charges stick. There wasn’t enough evidence then. Short of shooting him in the head and claiming ‘self-defense’ they wouldn’t have had a prayer of putting Rodriguez down and keeping him there. And while most of the squad probably wouldn’t have objected to doing just that---on Beaumont’s team you either played by the rules or you didn’t play at all.

They were on good terms with the DA’s office. Doing things right made the prosecutors’ jobs easier. Making sure all the I’s were dotted and T’s were crossed had given Beaumont’s Major Case Squad the best conviction rate in Houston.

Thinking about the dead girls, Tony couldn’t tell if Rodriguez was just another sick serial killer or if he was attempting to start a gang war. It could be a case of both. Either way, getting him off the streets was necessary, the sooner, the better.

Rodriguez had been spotted at one of the local hangouts. It was a bar attached to a run-down old hotel which doubled as a crack house and brothel. Houston PD made regular forays to clean it up, but so far no permanent solution had been found. Hopefully taking down Rodriguez would help, but Tony privately agreed with Joe when he’d said burning the place to the ground was probably the only thing that would come close to making a lasting change.

Like most gangs in the area, Rodriguez and his posse were outfitted like a small army. They weren’t guys to be taken lightly. The department believed sending in a show of force would make Rodriguez easier to arrest. They wanted to avoid a shoot out scenario, and the best way to do that was to look like they were prepared to go to war if need be. If the gang thought they were out gunned things stood a better chance of being
resolved peacefully.

Tony watched as Roberto patted down his own vest one more time, rechecking his equipment with neat, efficient movements. Tony liked that about his partner. The man didn’t waste time or energy. He carried himself like the professional he was. He was every bit as lethal as Ziva…he just didn’t make a production out of it.

Roberto smiled brightly at Tony, flashing even white teeth, before sobering. “Glad you are on my side, Tony.”

“Same here.” Tony reached out with a fist to bump knuckles with Roberto. Those open statements of appreciation and confidence in Tony’s ability were another thing he liked about his partner. Roberto wasn’t shy about calling him on being an ass either if the situation called for it. It was a good balance.

“You boys ready ta saddle up?”

Only Levon Lundy could ask something like that and not sound like he was trying to mimic John Wayne, Tony thought with a wry smile. From him, it didn’t sound like an overused, outdated cliché. Tony thought it might be the drawl, or the fact that Levon really could ride. He wasn’t sure. Whatever it was…it worked for him.

Tony gave the blond a wink and a smile. “Locked and loaded, Cowboy.”

Joe LaFiamma worked the pump action on the shotgun he was holding as he walked in to the room. “Think that’s my line, Tony.”

Tony eyed the weapon. “Isn’t that overkill?”

“No.” Joe’s grin reminded Tony of a dog bearing its teeth.

“I talked him out of a bazooka.” Levon grinned, lightly slapping Joe on the shoulder.

“Not hard to do, Lundy.” Joe snorted, rolling his eyes. “We don’t have one.”

Levon smirked. “If we did, you’d be packing it.”

Roberto and Tony traded knowing looks, agreeing with Levon’s assessment. Joe normally carried three guns on him—one under each arm in a custom made double shoulder holster and an ankle gun. Going out on a case like this, Joe had likely doubled his arsenal. It wasn’t exactly regulation, but then neither were the knives Tony currently carried. Beaumont never commented on their arsenal other than to tell them to make sure they documented what they were carrying and be prepared to fully justify or explain the need for it should anyone higher up the ladder started asking question.

“We ready to do this thing?” Levon asked, amber eyes assessing them. When everyone nodded, he turned toward the door. “All right, let’s go bag us a bad guy.”

Tony and Roberto followed Joe and Levon out to their truck. Tony waved to Carol Dewing and Esteban Chavez, getting a quick wave in return. They were part of the major case squad, and they were going in a black and white with another team from Vice. The guys in Vice had been the ones to provide the initial lead on Rodriguez and had worked closely with Dewing and Chavez. They were taking the lead. Joe, Levon, Roberto, Tony and two uniforms in another vehicle were acting as back up.

The approached the target building without lights or sirens blaring. No squealing tires or cloud of dust
announcing their arrival. There was no point in drawing undo attention. If this could be done quickly and quietly, it was better for everyone. Tony found he liked working with people who understood the value of subtle.

Locals loitering in the area vanished when they pulled up. Marked cars usually had that effect. It helped clear the area of innocent bystanders.

It had already been decided that the uniforms would stay outside. Their job was to watch the front and back exits. Tony wondered if he’d looked that young when he was still in blues. He shook his head. It was a sure sign he was getting old when he looked at other people and thought they were too damn young.

“Okay, Legs, where do ya want us?” Levon asked Carol. She was the lead on the case so it was her call.

To Tony’s knowledge, Levon was one of the few people she would tolerate being openly referred to as ‘legs’ from. Nearly everyone else was in danger of getting their ass kicked for even trying to use it.

No one had ever said, but if he had to guess, Tony figured the nickname was because Carol was nearly six feet tall and had a great pair of legs. With long blonde hair, cornflower blue eyes, and a figure any pinup girl would have envied, Carol was a beautiful woman. She was also one hell of a shot, and had a black belt in Aikido.

“Chavez and I will take the bar.” She pointed to the small building from which music could be heard and a neon light proclaimed beer and good food could be had. Tony had no doubt about the beer, but he was suspicious of the claim of ‘good food’. From the outside the place looked like it violated every health code ever written and he was sure the inside wasn’t any better.

Esteban Chavez, Tony had learned not long after he’d gotten the job, was originally a cop in Mexico. He’d chased a criminal across the boarder, working with Joe and Levon to see the man was returned to face trial in Mexico. He’d moved to the US not long after that. His contacts on the other side of the Rio Grande had made him a valuable asset to the department.

“Anders and Myers, you’re with us.” The vice cops nodded.

Dale Anders was built like the line backer. With his shaved head, steel toed boots, leather jacket and tattoos he looked like a bad ass biker. But at home, he was something of a big teddy bear if what his wife and three daughters had to say was true.

Bill Myers was nearly a foot shorter than his partner, weighed in at one hundred and thirty-five pounds if he was soaking wet. He had long curly hair tied back in a pony tail and old track marks on his arms. The marks came from vitamin shots he’d taken daily as a teenager in an effort to bulk up, not from shooting up drugs, but they certainly helped add to his cover when he need to look like a user trying to score.

“The rest of you guys take the motel.”

“Will do.” Joe nodded, the butt of the shotgun resting comfortably on his hip.

Carol looked at the uniforms. “If Rodriguez gets past us, stop him. Anyone else we aren’t really interested in tonight.”

Rodriguez was the only one they had a warrant for. And while there were no doubt at least a dozen crimes being committed in the bar and motel, they didn’t have the manpower or inclination to arrest everyone.

Tony moved with Roberto toward the motel. They didn’t move unconscious in step the way Joe and
Levon tended to do, but Tony thought that would come with time. Joe and Levon had been partners for six
years. Tony and Roberto, only had two months in. They were still learning each other’s strengths and
weaknesses, habits and preferences.

The motel was an old style. Tony guessed it had gone up in the late fifties. It had two stories with every
room having access to the outside. The heat and humidity that dominated Houston’s climate most of the year
had caused the paint to peal and flake off, leaving the main materials of construction, cinder block and
concrete, exposed to the elements. Both showed their age, cracking and crumbling wherever they were
visible. Metal stairs for access to the upper floor were on either end of the building. They looked suspect to
Tony, rusted and worn.

He grimaced when Levon indicated they should work from top to bottom, but took the steps of the far
stairway two at a time without complaint. It made sense to work the second floor first. If Rodriguez was in a
room on the first floor and ran, the uniforms would catch him. If he was on the second floor, they stood a
better chance of cornering him there if they were on the same floor. Levon and Joe took the other set of
stairs. They’d work the second floor from either end toward the middle.

Roberto followed Tony up, moving soundlessly. His ability to be so quiet never failed to remind Tony of
Ziva. She never made much noise either.

Tony knocked on the first door. He’d kick in every door if he had to, but he was hoping he wouldn’t have
to. And it never hurt to start out being polite. Checking the doorknob, he wasn’t entirely surprised to find the
lock was broken. It likely hadn’t worked in years.

Opening the door, Tony wrinkled his nose at the smell as they checked the room. Stale urine, vomit, the
lingering scent of drugs and god only knew what else made Tony glad they didn’t have to stay long. The
room had definitely seen better days. The dresser drawers had all been removed and smashed apart, random
pieces were scattered about the room. The bedspread was shredded, with the mattress underneath looking
equally trashed. A quick once over of the bathroom, Tony was fairly certain the tub was white when it was
installed but there was no way to know for sure looking at it now. The water likely hadn’t run years.

As they exited the room, Tony looked toward where Joe and Levon were leaving their first room. Getting an
all clear signal Tony and Roberto moved on to their second room. It was similar to the first. Roberto
muttered a curse in Spanish, shaking his head. Tony agreed. He’d seen cleaner sewers.

The third room, by contrast, was absolutely pristine. Tony pursed his lips, raising eyebrows at Roberto. His
partner shrugged.

“A puta with standards, maybe?”

“More likely that than an addict.” Tony agreed with a nod. He’d never seen an addict…at least ones so far
gone as to be using a flop house…having any sort of interest in personal hygiene much less inclined to clean
a room.

Carol radioed that they hadn’t found Rodriguez in the bar. If he was still in the area, it was probably in the
motel somewhere. She and her team were going to hold the patrons in place until she heard from them. She
wanted to know when they were finished searching the rooms or had located Rodriguez.

“Will do, Legs,” Levon answered, his soft drawl coming clearly through Tony’s ear piece.

They continued searching. It wasn’t until the fifth room that Tony and Roberto actually encountered
someone. A man was unconscious, lying prone on the floor, with a bit of rubber tubing around one arm, a
spoon, a needle and burning candle next to him. He was probably in his mid-twenties, but heavy drug use
made him appear far older. He was nearly skeletal thin, and Tony guessed he was a good fifty pounds under what would have been a healthy weight. Tony blew out the candle while Roberto checked the man’s pulse.

“Pulse is rapid but steady. Respiration seems okay.” Roberto shifted him into the rescue position as a precaution. At least he wouldn’t choke on his own vomit if he ended up puking in response to whatever poison he’d shot into his body. Although, looking at him, even if he survived the night, Tony didn’t think he’d live much longer without getting some kind of help with his addiction.

Tony keyed his mic to let Joe and Levon know what they’d found.

“He dying, DiNozzo?” Levon asked.

The question might have seemed cold or curt, but Tony knew it was just Levon’s way of getting to the point. If the guy needed immediate medical attention, it would fundamentally change their mission. With man was essentially stable, there wasn’t anything more they could do for him.

“Breathing and heart rate are fine.”

“I’ll have the uniforms call in a bus.” That was Joe’s voice, quiet but clear. Neither of them ever raised their voice when wearing a mic. “Better to be safe than sorry. In this neighborhood, we’ll be done before they get here.”

It was no secret that emergency personnel were hesitant to enter into such a high crime area. Given that it was often more like entering an active war zone Tony didn’t blame them. They were trained to save lives, not to dodge bullets or deal with being threatened by flying debris and ball bats. It wasn’t like EMTs had Kevlar or guns with which to shoot back.

“Let’s go, Mendez.” They still had a job to do.

Roberto nodded. He made the sign of the cross over the addict. Whether he was praying for him or offering last rites, Tony didn’t know.

At the next room a barely dressed prostitute answered Roberto’s knock. She stared at them for a moment, expression more resigned than surprised. She stepped back and opened the door wider.

“Not here to make your day worse, sweetie,” Roberto said quietly.

She nodded slowly, getting the message they weren’t here to bust her for practicing the world’s oldest profession. “What do you want?”

“You here alone?”

“My john left half an hour ago.” She sniffed discretely, wiping at her nose. “Haven’t gotten around to going back out yet.”

Tony wondered what she’d snorted but didn’t ask. He knew from his time in Baltimore that many women working the streets had a habit of some kind. A lot of them started out taking a hit of something to make bartering their bodies easier to do, and before they knew it they were turning tricks to pay for their habit.

Tony just checked the bathroom, and under the bed, while Roberto kept an eye on the woman. He confirmed she was the only one in the room.

“It’s clear,” he told Roberto.
“Stay here, and lock the door. We’ll be done soon.”

She gave Roberto a tired smile. “Lock doesn’t work.” It was more likely that her pimp had broken it, making sure she knew she couldn’t have even the illusion of privacy or protection.

Tony wanted to tell her to get help, to get out of this life, but he doubted she’d listen. She had to have heard it all before. Probably several times. He handed her one of cards for a free clinic and shelter that he kept in a pocket of his vest anyway. She sneered and flipped it back at him. Tony walked away. It had taken awhile but he’d learned arguing wouldn’t do any good, and he couldn’t help people who didn’t want to help themselves.

They met up with Joe and Levon outside their last room. Joe shook his head in answer to Tony’s unvoiced question. They headed down for the stairs. Tony stopped to check on the addict, making sure he was still breathing before jogging down the steps to meet up with Roberto.

More of the rooms on the first floor were occupied. Tony figured that was because he wasn’t the only one who didn’t trust the stairs, the added effort of going up was more than most wanted to put in when it came to getting high or paying for sex, and the locks on most of the doors on the first floor still worked. The better locks were a pain in the ass because it meant kicking in more doors.

They found a number of prostitutes busy with their customers. It never failed to amuse Tony the way people behaved when caught in flagrant delicto. A particularly ridiculous moment with an overweight, balding white man hiding his privates with a pair of stilettos had Tony wishing he had a camera.

All humor vanished when they heard muffled screams coming from the next room. The pitch and volume made it clear those cries had nothing to do with pleasure…at least not for the woman making them. Tony wasn’t surprised the only ones reacting to the noise were wearing a Kevlar vests. People didn’t get involved in this area…not if they could help it.

They met up with Joe and Levon outside the room where the screams had come from. That it was now silent didn’t reassure any of them. Levon stepped in front of the door, kicking it in with a brutal efficiency that snapped the flimsy chain as well as breaking the lock. Joe and Tony moved in from either side, entering the room with guns ready.

Rodriguez was on the bed, his pants open but not off and his shirt unbuttoned. He was trying to strangle a woman who was losing the fight to stop him. She kept to flailing, arms and legs swinging wildly in desperate, panic driven movements that for all the energy expended were doing nothing to save her. Rodriguez looked up in surprise when they burst in, but recovered quickly. He rolled off the bed, pulling the now weakly struggling woman with him so she was in front of him. He snatched up a handgun that was on the night stand.

“Put it down,” Joe ordered, leveling the shotgun. He couldn’t actually fire it without hitting the woman, but Tony hoped the threat posed by the shotgun would be enough to encourage Rodriguez to comply. Rodriguez sneered at Joe. “You aren’t going to shoot me, cerdo. You don’t want to hit the puta.”

“He might not, but I will,” Tony told him, voice flat and even. He kept his aim unwavering, centered on Rodriguez’s forehead. He could feel Levon and Roberto moving in behind him and Joe, waiting. The sound of Levon’s colt cocking was incredibly loud, increasing the tension another notch. Rodriguez’s dark eyes measured each of them. He put his gun to the woman’s head, her eyes already wide with fear got even larger, her mouth open as she panted for breath.

“I can still kill her.”
“You kill her and you won’t get out alive.” There was no doubt about that. Between the four of them, Jesus Rodriguez would be a dead man before the woman even hit the floor.

Tony could see Rodriguez weighing the odds. He didn’t get a chance to make up his mind. The woman turned her head enough that she could sink her teeth into Rodriguez’s arm. He howled, rearing back with his gun to club her with it.

“Put it down! Now!” Joe ordered. Roberto seconded him, making the same order in Spanish.

Rodriguez didn’t comply. Both Levon and Tony fired, aim no longer lethal, but just as effective. Levon’s shot took out the gun, the Colt 45 slug put a sizeable hole in Rodriguez’ right hand. Tony had aimed for his elbow, the 9mm round did serious damage to the joint, shattering bone and tearing muscle as it passed through to lodge in the wall only a few feet from where Levon’s had come to rest.

Rodriguez screamed, falling to his knees. The woman scrambled away from him, her back to the wall, bruises already appearing on her throat, face and arms. She was crying hysterically as she sank to the floor, knees drawn up to her chest.

“Mendez, call it in,” Joe ordered, moving forward to kick the handgun away from Rodriguez, keeping him covered even though it was unlikely he’d try anything else.

“DiNozzo, take care of her,” Levon nodded toward the woman, while he slipped his gun back in its holster. He grabbed a pillow off the bed, stripped the case and quickly tied it around Rodriguez’ bleeding arm before taking another and wrapping his hand.

Tony picked up a blanket that was on the floor and approached the sobbing woman. “It’s all right. You’re all right, now. Shhhh…It’s okay.” He spoke softly, keeping up the steady stream of nonsense as he got nearer, not wanting to scare her any more than she already was.

Up close, he could tell she probably wasn’t much over sixteen. He cursed silently. All the dead girls had been young, but not this young. He grimaced, giving Rodriguez a dirty look. He almost wished he’d gone for a kill shot. Miserable bastard.

Tony wrapped her up in the blanket. He held her in his arms, rocking slowly back and forth, keeping an eye on everything else going on around him.

Carol and her team arrived a few minutes later. The ambulance they ordered for the junkie upstairs had finally arrived. Levon ordered them to check out the woman Tony was holding first. Ordinarily a gunshot wound would have taken precedence, but Levon was old school. As long as Rodriguez wasn’t in danger of dying right that minute, victims, particularly women and children, always got attention first. In the few months he’d been on the force, Tony had never seen anyone argue with Levon about it. Tonight was no exception.

It took remarkably little time to wrap things up. Carol went to the hospital with the victim. They didn’t know yet whether or not she’d been raped, but given Rodriguez’s MO, it was likely. It would help their case if she would press charges, but that wasn’t something any of them really expected to happen. Esteban and two of the uniforms went with Rodriguez. He’d get treatment and be booked as soon as the doctors gave the okay. Tony didn’t feel bad knowing his shot and Levon’s combined might have crippled him for life.

When they went upstairs to check on the junkie, he’d left. The gunfire and sirens might have triggered some survival instinct, waking him up and getting him the hell out of the area. Nearly everyone else had fled the scene at the same time and for the same reason.

“Think we should set a match to it?” Tony asked Joe as they walked back to the truck.
“Now would be the ideal time.” Joe sighed, but shook his head no. He wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “You okay?”

It was part of their routine. They didn’t end a case or a day without asking each other that question. And it wasn’t just asking the question---anyone could do that much---but knowing the answer genuinely mattered was another thing that made working in Houston so much different than NCIS.

“Tony?” Joe jostled him, blue eyes narrowing in concern.

“I’m okay.” Tony gave his cousin quick smile. “Just…a real long day.”

“Amen.” Joe looked over at Roberto who was walking in step with them. “Mendez, you all right?”

“Good to go, LaFiamma.”

“Lundy?”

“I’m fine, Joe.” Levon slide into the driver’s seat. “I want a drink, and something to eat.”

“Hear that,” Joe agreed, getting into the passenger seat. None of them had eaten lunch or dinner before leaving the station. Knowing one was going into a potentially lethal situation tended to put a damper on even Tony’s appetite.

Joe looked over his shoulder. “You guys want to go to Chicken’s after we’re done at the station?”

“Sure.”

Chicken’s B-B-Q Pit was Joe and Levon’s favorite place to go after work. The owner, a massive black man who made Tony feel small in comparison, was an old friend of theirs. He’d become, by extension, a friend of Tony’s. Chicken kept a table in the back reserved just for the Major Case Squad where they could relax and recoup without having to worry about dealing with any of the other customers if a case went bad. He kept everyone’s favorite music in the jukebox for them to celebrate with when a case went well. And he made the best ribs Tony had ever eaten.

Tony settled back into his seat with a silent sigh. He couldn’t remember hanging out with his old team, not once. They only time they’d gotten together before his getting involved with Jeanne had been the rest of the team getting a home cooked meal from Ziva from which they’d deliberately excluded Tony. There were plans for drinks the night his undercover case went bad---but that never happened. They’d never got together to celebrate a successful bust, or commiserate over a bad one.

His old team didn’t spend any off duty time together. They didn’t issue good natured challenges over pool games or darts, laugh their asses off trying to line dance or sing karaoke. They didn’t hang out on the weekends—shooting hoops, cleaning out the garage or helping out at the local YMCA.

Two weeks ago Tony had helped Roberto repaint the nursery in his sister Angela’s house. Angela’s husband was deployed overseas, and with the second child on the way, a boy this time, she wanted to get the nursery ready for him but didn’t feel up to doing it on her own. Tony had to agree with her that pink walls with butterflies wouldn’t be right for him. He’d never had a partner who included him in family things before. It was so incredible to have Roberto’s sister treat him just like she did her brother. She didn’t even hesitate to let him play with her two year old daughter.

And Roberto had helped Tony hunt for a place of his own. So far nothing had turned up, but it was great that his partner was willing to go look with him. Hell, Kate wouldn’t even let him stay with her when the boiler blew up at his old place. And he couldn’t see Ziva or McGee offering to drive around the city looking at prospects.
He and Roberto might not have worked out all the details of their partnership yet, but as friends, they were already well ahead of anyone else Tony had ever worked with. It was a good feeling to know he could count on Roberto both on and off the job.

When he weighed one against the other, Houston PD didn’t tower over NCIS as the better option, but there were still more pluses than minus. He regretted how he left, so abrupt and with little explanation or notice, but he didn’t regret leaving. All in all, Tony thought to himself as he watched the city he was coming to think of as home flash by the passenger window...coming to Houston had been a good move.
Gibbs sighed deeply, unconsciously thinking about the case his team had just closed as he sanded another board for his boat. He'd wanted to let Bakr get away with murdering the recruiter. The son of a bitch had killed Bakr's son, and Gibbs intimately understood the desire for vengeance. He could have simply overlooked the prayer beads at the scene, ignored the evidence Bakr was there, and closed the case. No one was going to mourn the death of one more terrorist anyway. It would have been so easy to just look the other way. He'd done it before---and that was ultimately the deciding factor.

Gibbs asked himself how many more things would he turn a blind eye to before he found he wasn't really looking at all. How far down the slope was he prepared to slide? He'd messed with evidence to help hide the fact that good Marine had only one kidney. He'd given information they'd garnered on an investigation to gangbangers because there wasn't enough to convict the suspect---and he knew they'd kill the man for him. He let Franks walk away from what was clearly a calculated murder, settling a score the same way Shepard had wanted to do with La Grenouille. How could he judge her actions as so wrong when he'd actively aided and abetted letting Franks do essentially the same thing?

Gibbs had always considered himself an honorable man. If he was going to live up to that personal assessment, he had to redraw the line and stay committed to it. There had to be a boundary to his own hypocrisy. As much as he agreed with Bakr's actions, it was still his job to maintain order, to enforce the law. Bakr was currently sitting in a cell awaiting his arraignment.

Gibbs grimaced. The only good thing that had come out of this case was seeing Brent Langer again. It had been over ten years since he'd worked with the man. He'd heard his former agent had taken a position with another agency, but he'd never thought Langer would end up with the FBI. He had to admit, it was a good fit for the man. And it looked like Langer was doing well for himself.

Gibbs glanced over to the innocent looking file sitting on his work bench. He'd gotten Langer to give him the information the FBI had on Joseph LaFiamma. It hadn't been hard to get the other man to supply it. Langer owed him a favor or two---especially after they'd found out the FBI to have already bugged the Mosque their murdered Marine had worshiped. Giving Gibbs information on LaFiamma was an easy way to pay off one of his debts.

Gibbs put down his sander, and walked over to the work bench. He'd already read the file twice, but found himself wanting to look at it again. LaFiamma had been a person of interest for the FBI when he went to college. They'd tried to recruit him with the intention of getting him to turn on his family. Gibbs hadn't been too surprised to find out that turning on his family, even though he'd been disowned, wasn't the sort of thing LaFiamma had been willing to do. Certainly not for what the FBI had to offer. Gibbs snorted. He wouldn't have been tempted by that-not even for a second.

They had kept tabs on LaFiamma since then, following his career as a cop. Gibbs wasn't entirely sure why. If he had to guess, it was probably just because someone, somewhere still harbored hopes of using Joe as an -in' to bring down his uncle.

He was amused to find that Tony warranted only a footnote in LaFiamma's file. He was listed as a distant relative with whom Joe stayed in touch. No one at the FBI or the OCB apparently thought that relationship significant or worth pursing---especially when it was also noted that Tony was on the outs with his family as much as Joe was his.

Gibbs poured a shot of bourbon into his dusty coffee mug. Flipping open the file he scanned the first page.
He knew it was petty but he had been hoping to find Tony's cousin was dirty. It would give him the advantage, a way to drive a wedge between them.

He'd need some sort of leverage because they had to be close. It was Joe that Tony ran to. Gibbs was sure of that much. The phone calls, the trip to Houston, listing of next of kin and emergency contact---it all pointed to Tony going to Joe. Gibbs had checked the national law enforcement registry, confirming what he suspected---as of at least six weeks ago; Tony was part of the Houston PD.

He pursed his lips in annoyance. He should be damn glad Tony hadn't gone to just anyone. It had taken them nearly three months to figure out where he was. If he hadn't had Joe to go to, they'd have never found him.

Three fucking months, Gibbs cursed silently. It still infuriated him how long finding Tony had taken. He was tempted to throw his mug against the wall, but restrained himself. He didn't feel like drinking from the bottle or having to go upstairs for another mug.

Had he been here, Tony would have thought of checking with his frat brothers. Digging into people's past, looking for obscure links was something he'd excelled at. Both Ziva and McGee had a tendency to focus more on professional rather than personal when it came to searching for people. McGee did so because it was easier for him to hack into a data base than it was to talk to people. And Tony had graduated before things like college yearbooks were regularly scanned into computers and available on line---so the information wasn't readily available with a few key strokes, and that was something McGee had a habit of overlooking. Not everything could be found on a computer.

Ziva was often inclined to believe everyone had some sort of ulterior motive---that one didn't maintain or keep friends who weren't politically useful. She couldn't fathom why Tony might have stayed in touch with his frat brothers when none of them were government agents, spies or otherwise connected to a useful power base. And Tony hadn't really talked about his frat brothers to her.

Gibbs rolled his eyes. It shouldn't have mattered that Tony hadn't talked about his frat brothers in the last two years or ever mentioned them by surname. They all knew what fraternity he'd belonged to and which chapter---it was in his file. And at least Gibbs, Abby, Ducky and McGee knew Tony had been close to his frat brothers until relatively recently. It wouldn't have been hard to find a yearbook, look at the registry for guys who graduated from Ohio State at the same time, and find someone who would know Tony had a cousin he was close to.

It hasn't even occurred to Gibbs until yesterday when an alumni announcement for his Alma Mater had come for Tony at the office. He still got stray bits of mail and the mail boy had taken to giving whatever came to Gibbs. Gibbs had snatched it out of his hands, feeling like an idiot for not bothering to check what should have been painfully obvious from the beginning.

A few phone calls later and Kyle Robinson, Tony's former roommate in the fraternity house, was telling them all about what a great guy Tony's cousin was, how he'd lived with Tony for a time, and that they spent every holiday together. The last Kyle had heard Joe was working in Houston as a cop. He thought Tony was proud his younger cousin had followed in his footsteps.

Kyle hadn't heard from Tony in over a year, but he figured with them getting older and growing up, it was only natural they'd drift apart. He'd joked about how older guys like them wouldn't stand a chance at scoring with the Coeds. That they didn't crack a smile the entire time was probably one of the reasons Kyle asked several times if Tony was in some sort of trouble. Gibbs was glad McGee fielded that question because he really had no idea what to say, and he damn sure wasn't going to admit to having lost Tony.

So they knew who Joseph LaFiamma was. And that Tony was with him. The only question that remained...
was when were they going to go after him.

Gibbs' eyed the half done skeleton of his latest boat, sorely tempted to take out a hammer and beat the hell out of it for no better reason than it gave him something to vent his frustration on. After three months what was he supposed to say to Tony? Would Tony believe him if he told him they'd been looking for him since the day he'd left?

Gibbs growled. If it were him, he wouldn't believe it. The only person it had ever taken them longer to locate was Ari---he had been out of the county and had help hiding. Reviewing Tony's actions, Gibbs doubted he could claim Tony was trying to hide. He hadn't made it hard to find him. His file had Joe's name, number and address. Hell his phone records had given them a link they'd allowed themselves to be stonewalled on.

There was no way Tony would believe it was just arrogance and stupidity on Gibbs' part and the team's that had allowed three months to pass. Although, given what Shepard had said, the arrogance might not be that much of a stretch for Tony to accept. Ducky would certainly back the stupidity since he was the one who had to point them in the direction they should have been looking in to start with.

The fact that Tony got a job didn't help Gibbs' cause any. It meant he'd been serious about leaving and staying gone. Gibbs had spent his time in Mexico hanging around Mike's place doing odd jobs. In hindsight, he knew he hadn't looked for something of his own, or anything more permanent, because he didn't truly plan on staying.

Would Tony just walk away from his new position to come back to NCIS? Gibbs had doubts about that. For all Tony's job jumping before he'd started at NCIS, he never left a position until he'd been working for at least eighteen months.

He had to have made a few friends there already. Tony was good at that. He was on a first name basis with everyone in the Naval Yard in two weeks. By now, he likely knew the name of every cop in Houston, the name of their wives and girlfriends and where their kids went to school.

And he had family there. Gibbs didn't know if Joe was a last resort or final solution, but Tony's former roommate made it sound like they'd always been close. Tony's phone records bore that out---he'd called Joe at least once a month and Joe had called him. So even though he'd never mentioned the man, he was obviously important to Tony.

Gibbs snarled. Why hadn't Tony mentioned Joe? A quiet voice in his mind, one that sounded a lot like Ducky asked, "Would have you have listened if he had?"

The honest answer was -no'. He thought he knew all he needed to know about Tony DiNozzo. Apparently he'd been wrong about that---very wrong.

Gibbs glanced up when he heard someone coming down the steps. He kept his expression neutral as is visitor's face came into view. What the hell could Fornell want with him?

"Tobias." Gibbs kept his tone level.

-Jethro." Fornell's tone mimicked Gibbs'.

Gibbs offered him the mug he was holding. Fornell rolled his eyes, but took it. "Some day I'll remember to bring my own."

"You want to tell me why you're here?" Gibbs glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight.
"About five months ago, we pulled a body out of the bay." Fornell sipped from the mug before making a face and setting it aside.

"And you're telling me this because-" Gibbs left the statement open ended waiting for Fornell to fill in the gap.

"Because it was the body of Renee Benoit."

Gibbs raised both eyebrows, trying to look surprised. Given that the man had sought protection with Shepard and had been denied—Gibbs hadn't held out much hope for him living long. But since he hadn't turned up at the yacht and there'd been no sign of him since, Gibbs thought there was always a slim chance he was still alive.

"How did he--"

"Single gun shot to the head." Fornell looked at him, expression giving away nothing. "It looked like a suicide."

Gibbs took a breath and let it out slowly. If the FBI still thought it was suicide Fornell wouldn't be in his basement, which meant they now thought La Grenouille had been murdered. Had Shepard actually killed him? It was possible. She was obsessed with avenging what she believed was her father's murder. Gibbs knew she was capable of killing—it wasn't like she hadn't done her share of 'wet work'. And she'd been a target for an investigation already for her unsanctioned operation. It wouldn't be much of a reach for the FBI to suspect her.

Gibbs stared at Fornell, waiting for the other man to tell him more. He wasn't sure he owed Shepard any loyalty, but Gibbs wasn't going to give her up either. If she had killed La Grenouille it wouldn't be up to the likes of Fornell to bring her down---Gibbs would do that himself.

"Jeanne Benoit is back in town." Fornell's eyes narrowed as they studied Gibbs.

Gibbs wasn't sure what to make of that non sequitur. "I did not know that."

"She's telling an interesting story."

"Oh?"

"She claims it was DiNozzo that shot her father."

Gibbs glared at Fornell. "You can't be serious."

"Doesn't matter if I am or not, she is." Fornell shook his head.

"Then why the hell are you here?"

"I'm just giving you a heads up. I know how you get when someone messes with your people. And it's never any fun finding out one of your own is a murderer." Fornell looked slightly apologetic. "A team is already on their way to DiNozzo's place."

Gibbs' jaw clenched. Fornell obviously didn't know that Tony had left. But when he found out...it wasn't going to look good. Knowing the FBI they'd see that as proof of guilt and try to use that against him. Why else would he have left D.C. and NCIS?
"Stay out of it, Jethro. Just let me do my job."

Gibbs turned his back on Fornell. He needed to get in touch with McGee. He'd know how to get into the personnel records. First order of business was to delete Joe's name. He didn't want Fornell finding that now so obvious lead on where Tony was. He wondered if McGee could hack into the national law enforcement registry. Maybe he could delete the information revealing Tony was working in Houston.

"I mean it Gibbs. Stay out of this." Fornell grabbed Gibbs' shoulder and turned him around. He looked him in the eye. "I will play hardball if I have to."

"I understand." Gibbs nodded curtly. "Get out."

Fornell smirked as he turned to leave. "I'll be in touch."

Gibbs watched him make his way back up the stairs. Bastard.

Gibbs knew Tony hadn't killed Renee Benoit, no matter what his damn daughter said. The best way to prove Tony's innocence was to find the guilty party. Gibbs was fairly certain Shepard had done it...but proving it would be another matter. He'd need to know what sort of case the FBI had. More things for McGee to hack into.

He hit the speed dial button for McGee. When the younger man picked up, sounding wide awake, Gibbs knew he probably had never gone to bed. McGee had likely been waiting to hear what Gibbs had decided about going after Tony now that they knew where he was.

"Grab your gear, your computer and any other gizmo or do-hickey you'll need to hack into the FBI's crime file. I want your ass here in twenty minutes."

There was a pause. "Why-"

"Do it, McGee."

"On my way, Boss."

Gibbs hung up. He called Abby. Like McGee she sounded wide awake.

"Can you get me a ticket to Houston? And a rental car?"

"Absolutely, Bossman." He didn't need to see her grinning, he could hear it. He could hear her typing as well. "When did you want to fly?"

"What's the earliest they've got?"

"6 AM."

Gibbs glanced at the clock. That gave him a good four hours before he'd have to leave for the airport. Hopefully he'd have some idea of what sort of evidence the FBI had by then. "That'll do."

"Why aren't you taking anyone with you?"

Gibbs ignored the question. "When you get it booked, bring the paperwork and your computer to my place. I need you to help McGee."
"Help him do wh-"

Gibbs hung up before she could finish her question. He called Ziva. She answered on the second ring.

"I want you at my place in twenty minutes."

"Understood."

Gibbs debated for a moment before calling Ducky. He didn't want to disturb the man or his mother at this hour of the night, but Ducky wouldn't appreciate being left out of the loop. Not filling him in would do irreparable damage to their already wounded friendship.

He kept his call short, giving Ducky the basics. There wasn't anything Ducky could do until they got the FBI file. Gibbs told Ducky he'd call him when they had something he could work with.

"Don't be too hard on the boy, Jethro, when you see him. Tony won't appreciate being taken to task like an errant school boy. And it will not help your cause to piss him off."

"I'll be nice."

Ducky snorted. "Nice isn't something Tony expects or trusts coming from you."

Gibbs winced. Tony had told him after Kate died that his being nice worried him. Gibbs should have realized then what that said about their relationship.

"Honesty without hostility will do, Jethro." Ducky sighed softly. "Tony deserves that, and should not be forced to accept anything less."

"I'll do my best."

"An apology wouldn't be a bad place to start."

"It's a sign-"

"Of weakness, yes I know." Ducky sounded decidedly disappointed with him. Gibbs hated how that made him feel like he was only an inch tall.

"I'll be ready and waiting when you've got something for me."

Ducky hung up before Gibbs could. Gibbs shook his head. Damn Ducky. Why the hell did he have to be right?

He still had no clear idea what to say to Tony when he saw him. He had a feeling that if he delayed going until he figured it out, he might never get there at all—and that definitely wasn't an option. Gibbs would just have to come up with something by the time his plane landed in Houston. Hopefully what he came up with would be good enough.
Gibbs’ three hour flight touched down in Houston at eight in the morning local time. He held a tight rein on his temper as he impatiently waited for his chance to deplane. Gibbs merely grunted at the stewardess as she gave him a cheerful ‘good morning’ and ‘thank you for flying with us’ when he walked off the plane. He hated those stupid platitudes and fake smiles.

He worked his way through the usual airport maze, stopping only to buy a cup of coffee. Gibbs grimaced when he took his first sip. It looked like coffee, and it smelled like coffee, but it definitely didn’t taste like his usual brand. It would just have to do until he could find something better. After being up all night, he wasn’t willing to go without.

He made a mental note to thank Abby for working her magic. Not only had she gotten him on a flight that took off and landed on time, but she also got him a rental car that was ready and waiting when he got to the counter. From now on, she was handling all his travel arrangements.

Gibbs tossed his duffle bag in the car, after he pulled out the directions McGee had printed out for him. He checked his cellphone as well. No messages. Damn. That meant they hadn’t made any headway while he was gone. McGee had managed to hack into the FBI database and had gotten photos of Renee Benoit’s body and autopsy report for Ducky to look at. While he did that, Abby hacked into NCIS and deleted from Tony’s personnel file references to Joe LaFiamma. All she’d had to do was remove the updated form, and leave the original—the one with Gibbs as his primary contact—in place. Ziva had gone to the office to find the hard copy file and shred anything else that might be a link they could have overlooked. She was also keeping an eye out for FBI agents that Fornell might send to tail or arrest them when he found out Tony wasn’t in D.C.

Gibbs sighed. He had hoped they’d have found something by now, but even he had to acknowledge he was asking a lot of them. Figuring out what killed a man and when without a chance to review the crime scene or actually touch the body wasn’t going to be easy. Not to mention he was making them work through the night. But his team was good, and Gibbs was confident they were up to the challenge. They had to be. He wasn’t going to see Tony go down for something he knew the younger man hadn’t done.

Gibbs read through the directions to the precinct where Tony now worked. He had no idea what shift Tony was on or when he might arrive at the office, but it seemed like the best place to start. In truth, it was just about the only place he could start. Gibbs had no idea where Tony was living. The national enforcement registry didn’t include home addresses or phone numbers.

He could have called the numbers he had for Joe and asked for Tony’s home number and address, but Gibbs was reluctant to do that. If Tony had confided in his cousin at all, and Gibbs was sure he had, then talking to Gibbs voluntarily wouldn’t be high on Joe’s list of things to do. The only leverage Gibbs would have to force Joe to tell him what he wanted to know was a possible murder charge and Tony being a person of interest in an on going case. Gibbs couldn’t see that as being a good way to introduce himself or start a conversation.

Gibbs made his way through the rush hour traffic. He cursed the crazy, stupid drivers vehemently, wondering how in the hell anyone got anywhere in Houston. His failure to abide by the rules of the road didn’t bother most of the other drivers. They practiced their own brand of kamikaze driving, determined to get where they were going at all cost and the hell with everyone else. Under other circumstances Gibbs
might have enjoyed the challenge, but after no sleep and a cup of crappy coffee, he was hard pressed not to just draw his gun and shoot someone.

Nearly two hours after he’d left the airport, Gibbs finally made it to the precinct station, the Reisner Building. It was an impressive steel and glass structure that fit in well with surrounding skyscrapers. If not for the police shield etched into the glass and stamped into the concrete it could easily have been just another office building.

Gibbs parked in the parking garage across the street. It was pricey but better than leaving the rental on the street and shoving quarters into a meter. He had no idea how long this was going to take---but he knew better than to think it would be resolved in the time a few quarters would buy him. Last thing he wanted was to have to deal with his rental being towed.

Gibbs walked into the building. He wasn’t surprised to see a metal detector in place and a guard on duty. He pulled out his badge, showing his ID.

“Special Agent Gibbs with Naval Criminal Investigation Service,” Gibbs said, formally introducing himself. “I have my sidearm with me.” It was always a good idea to keep security informed that he was armed rather than have them overreact when they found a weapon.

The guard nodded. He held out a small plastic tray. “Please place your badge and all weapons inside.”

Gibbs dropped his badge in the small tray and carefully placed his gun in it. He added his knife. The guard didn’t even bat an eye at the additional weapon---his expression indicated he’d almost expected there to be more. It made Gibbs wonder what sort of people routinely came through the check point. After Gibbs had stepped through the metal detector, the guard offered him a clipboard with a sign in sheet. Gibbs quickly wrote his name. He handed back the clipboard.

“Who are you here to see?” The guard asked, offering the tray with his gun, knife and badge back to Gibbs.

“Anthony DiNozzo.”

The guard frowned. His gaze narrowed as he gave Gibbs a once over. “Gibbs? Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs?”

“Yes.” Gibbs felt suddenly uneasy, although he wasn’t entirely sure why.

The guard nodded once, reaching for the phone. “I’ll buzz upstairs and see if anyone in Major Crimes is available to escort you.”

“If you’ll tell me what floor I could just go up myself. No reason to bother—“

“It’s not a bother, Sir, it’s policy.”

The guard’s tone was firm. He wouldn’t tolerate an argument, that much was clear. And starting a fist fight
The guard’s tone was firm. He wouldn’t tolerate an argument, that much was clear. And starting a fist fight in the lobby wasn’t going to get Gibbs any closer to seeing Tony. So he just bit back his usual response to being called ‘Sir’ and nodded. His jaw tightened as he listened to the guard’s side of the conversation with whoever was on the other end of the phone.

“Hey, Lundy…I was trying to reach Joe…Oh? Right. Forgot about that…The guy he mentioned…the one Tony used to work for…he’s here asking to see Tony…Okay, we’ll be here.”

The guard hung up. "If you'll just have a seat, Sir," he pointed to a row of chairs along the wall, "someone will be with you shortly."

"Don't call me 'sir'," Gibbs snarled. He was more pissed people here already more knew about him than he did them, and that they might actively thwart his attempt to see Tony, than he was about the moniker. But it was a safe and normal thing for him to get annoyed with.

"Just trying to be polite," The guard said calmly, not fazed by Gibbs’ attitude. “But if it works better for you for me to be rude….Go park your butt and wait, asshole, or I'll throw you the hell out. That suit you better?"

Gibbs had grown accustomed to people cowering when he showed anger. He’d forgotten not everyone was so easily intimidated or had been in the service with the ingrained need to follow the military standard for dealing with authority. Gibbs had also forgotten that the further one got from DC the less weight being a federal agent carried. Rather than earning any respect, a federal badge could more often garner resentment.

“It’s been a long day,” Gibbs said quietly, making an excuse for his behavior without actually apologizing.

“And it’s getting longer by the minute.” The guard pointed to the chairs again.

The guard’s no-nonsense approach reminded Gibbs of his drill instructor. It just added to the temptation to kick his ass. He could hear the voice in his head that sounded like Ducky pointing out the guard was on his home turf, if he needed back up it wouldn’t take much for him to get it. And it wouldn’t help Gibbs’ case any, even if he won. He couldn’t see Tony appreciating Gibbs starting a riot where he worked. So Gibbs took a seat.

Gibbs sighed, wishing he’d stopped for another cup of coffee. He’d finished the cup he got at the airport before he’d gotten to Reisner. There wasn’t any in the lobby that he could see or smell. Damn.

His attention was drawn away from the guard and the many ways he could hurt the man when the elevator doors opened. A lanky blond who looked like he’d stepped out of a Marlborough ad exited. Seeing his face, Gibbs finally placed the name ‘Lundy’ the guard had mentioned on the phone. The FBI on Joe LaFiamma had provided a picture and name of his partner, Levon Lundy.

“Hey Nelson.” Lundy called to the guard, giving him a casual two-finger salute.

“Lundy.” Nelson smiled, returning the salute.

Lundy glanced to where Gibbs was sitting, amber colored eyes assessing him with a thoroughness that had
the former Marine unconsciously sitting up straighter. “He give you any trouble?”

“Other than a skunk eye or two, he was been well behaved.”

“Glad to hear it.”

As Lundy approached, Gibbs stood. Introducing himself was unnecessary and he wasn’t sure if he should offer his hand to shake. So he settled for a curt nod.

“Come with me, please.” Although the statement was polite, there was no mistaking it wasn’t a request.

Gibbs almost baulked at being ordered around. But he’d played this sort of game before—usually from the other side. It was better to give in now when it didn’t cost him a thing, than fight when it might cost him more than he was prepared to pay.

Gibbs followed Lundy into the elevator. He half expected the other man to hit the emergency stop switch but he just pushed the button for the third floor. The trip was made in silence. He couldn’t tell if it was because Lundy wasn’t much of a talker, or if the lack of conversation was intended to be intimidating. If it was the latter, Lundy was in for a rude awakening; silence never bothered Gibbs.

When the elevator doors opened, Lundy led Gibbs down a short hall and into a room he immediately recognized as being an interrogation room. The stark metal table, with matching chairs, and a mirror on the wall made it hard to mistake the room for anything else. Gibbs deliberately took a chair that put his back to the mirror---his usual spot during an interrogation. Lundy smirked, but didn’t argue. He sat across from Gibbs.

“This is cozy,” Gibbs said dryly.

“Yep.” Lundy gave him a feral grin. “Private too.”

Gibbs kept his expression neutral. He was fully aware that there were only two people who knew he was in the building. And right now, only one knew where he was. If Lundy was looking to even the score on Tony’s behalf, he had certainly picked the right place for it. Gibbs took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, centering himself for whatever might happen. He didn’t honestly expect Lundy to throw a punch, especially not with them both seated, but it always paid to be prepared.

“You don’t want me to see Tony, do you?” Gibbs made sure to make the question seem conversational rather than accusatory.

“Depends.”

Gibbs arched an eyebrow. He’d expected a more definitive answer. “On?”

“Why it is you want to see him.”
“That’s between him and me.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Lundy leaned forward, “you don’t talk to me, you aren’t talkin’ to him.”

“I doubt Tony would appreciate you getting involved in his personal business.”

“If this was personal, you’d be right.” Lundy’s lips curled upward in a small smile. “But it isn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I may have been born at night, but it wasn’t last night.” Levon gave him a disgusted look. “You being here at all proves this isn’t personal.”

“How do you figure that?” Gibbs asked, genuinely curious. Just what had Tony told Lundy about him? Was it already too late to make amends?”

“You aren’t the sort to go out of yer way just to drop in on a former teammate.” Lundy stated with absolute conviction. “It’s out of sight out of mind with you when it comes to people. The only people who matter to you are connected to your job. And they only matter as long as they are working up to your expectations.”

Gibbs blinked. “Tony said that?”

“Nope.” Lundy gave him an enigmatic smile. Gibbs kept himself from frowning, not wanting to react to what Lundy had said. He didn’t know anything about Lundy except his name and the fact that he was Joe LaFiamma’s partner. He was not in a good position for this war of words.

“So what business brought you to Houston? And what does it have to do with Tony?”

“I didn’t say it was business.”

Lundy rolled his eyes. “To get here this time o’ day…looking like you haven’t been to bed…you either took the red eye or caught the first flight out o’ D.C. Won’t be hard to back track which airline and when the tickets were bought. Guessing that would prove the flight was booked in a hurry ‘cause damn few people take those flights unless it’s an emergency or they ended up getting bumped. Given that you live in D.C., and the flight originated there, I doubt you got bumped. And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t you who paid through the nose for those last minute tickets.”

Lundy cocked his head to one side. “For you to leave in a hurry, on the government’s dime, and suddenly be all fired up to talk to Tony after three fucking months, it isn’t personal. It’s business.”

Gibbs wanted to retort that it had taken that long to find Tony, and it was personal damn it, but he remained silent. He didn’t have any real counters to Lundy’s logic, and Gibbs knew he’d learn more if he just let Lundy continue to speak.
“We haven’t had a time sensitive case involving any military personnel since before Tony moved here. So for it to be business that involves Tony, it’s related to a case he worked at NCIS. And there was only one with left with loose ends. La Grenouille.”

Gibbs leaned forward. “Tony told you about an active case?”

“Tony told me some of it. The rest I found out on my own.” Lundy shrugged one shoulder.

“That was classified.”

“Oh it was classified all right.” Lundy snorted. “Fell in to the clusterfuck category. But it wasn’t any top secret, eyes only, matter of national security bullshit. Because the case never actually existed…at least not NCIS’ part in it. And plenty o’ people are unhappy ‘bout another agency playing in their pond for there to be someone willing ta talk to me.”

Gibbs managed not to show a reaction. Inwardly he seethed. Damn Shepard. Even being half the country away she could mess up what should have been a simple thing for him to do.

“Tell me why you want to talk to Tony.”

“No.”

“Suit yerself.” Lundy nodded, and got up from his chair. He headed for the door.

“That’s it?” Gibbs asked, genuinely surprised by the other man’s brusque acceptance

Lundy turned to look at him. “I’m all for doing things the easy way. But I got no issue with doing it the hard way. You don’t want to tell me…no problem. You can sit here and stew, without any coffee, while I find out on my own.”

“You really think it’ll be that easy?” Gibbs challenged, annoyed by the confidence in the other man’s voice. And pissed he’d mentioned coffee. It reminded Gibbs how long it had been since his last cup.

“Only way three people can keep a secret is if two are already dead.” Lundy smiled. “And I’m betting more than three people know why yer here. Just a matter of time until I find someone willing to give me a few more pieces to the puzzle.”

Counting Fornell and his people, Gibbs’ team, anyone from the CIA who knew Renee Benoit was dead, Jeanne Benoit---Lundy wasn’t wrong. But he would have to know who to talk to. Lundy had people he could ask. He’d already mentioned finding out things on his own Tony hadn’t told him. They’d probably tell him even more if he asked. The blond confirmed his suspicions.

“I got a few more friends in the FBI. Got a couple with NSA and Homeland Security too. Hell I even
know a couple with JAG. And they all owe me a favor or two.”

Lundy’s smile widened. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve made yerself some enemies, Gibbs. They might not want to help me, but there’s bound to be a few who’d tell me what I want to know if they thought it might fuck you up. Couple o’ them already have.”

Lundy opened the door. “You stay here and wait quietly.” He pointed to the camera hanging from the ceiling. “You get any bright ideas, like picking the lock, and I’ll have a team down here ready to beat you unconscious before you make it to the end of the hall.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“I suck at poker, Gibbs.” Lundy chuckled darkly. “Learned a long time ago, if you can tell the truth, no reason not to.”

Lundy sobered, brown eyes hard and unforgiving. “Only reason I haven’t already beaten the shit out of you is ‘cause Tony said he learned a lot from you…and on some level he still respects you. Can’t quite understand why, but I don’t have to either. It was that fucked up bitch Shepard who whored him out and then made him quit. Guess that’s why—“

“Wait.” Gibbs held up hand. “What do you mean she made him quit?”

Lundy shook his head. “If you don’t already know, not sure that’s my story to tell.”

Seeing an opening, Gibbs offered, “You tell me what I want to know, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Lundy smirked. “You tell me first…and if it’s something Tony needs to hear, you can tell him. He’ll tell you about Shepard if he thinks you need to know.”

“Why not just tell me—“

“I can find out why yer here, we both know that.” Brown eyes met blue. “I leave you sitting here…you are going to lose your only chance to tell yer story to Tony.”

Gibbs’ gaze narrowed. “My only chance?”

“Guaranteed.” Lundy gave him a slightly apologetic look. “Anyone I talk to will put their own slant on why yer here. And that will be the version I give Tony. After that, he won’t want to listen to yours.”

Gibbs glared at Lundy. The man was right. It wouldn’t be hard to put a spin on his presence in Houston…one that made it look like Gibbs was siding with Shepard or Fornell. The last thing he wanted was for Tony to think he was in Houston to arrest him. And he had to have a chance to explain why the hell he hadn’t shown up sooner. Not to mention finding out why it was Tony left.
“Done,” Gibbs declared making up his mind. There was too much at stake to get involved in a pissing contest. He should have realized that from the beginning. He wasn’t going to let Tony face an FBI investigation for a murder he hadn’t committed… not again. And if he failed to play ball with Lundy, his reason for coming to Houston at all would be moot.

“I want a cup of coffee first.”

“Figured as much.” Lundy nodded. He waved to someone in the hall. A Hispanic looking man, carrying two cups of coffee came into the room. He shot Gibbs a dirty look before setting the cups on the table.

“Thanks, Roberto,” Lundy said.

Roberto said something to Lundy too quiet for Gibbs to make out. Lundy nodded, shutting the door after Roberto left.

“You were that sure I’d cave?” Gibbs asked, taking a satisfying sip of coffee. It was dark, bitter, and exactly what he wanted.

“Nope.” Lundy sat down, taking the other cup. “I just believe in being prepared.”

Gibbs sighed. No time like the present, he told himself. Gibbs started talking, filling Lundy in on why he was in Houston, and what his team had done so far. There was a lot of ground to cover, and his gut was telling him they didn’t have much time.
Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Gibbs filled Lundy in on what he knew about La Grenouille, including Shepard’s vendetta, Rene’s desire to quit the weapons dealing business, the search of his yacht and coming up empty, Jeanne leaving the country and her subsequent return, what his team was doing now, what he expected them to discover and accomplish. He told him everything. Lundy had called it right when he said the case wasn’t really classified—at least not at NCIS since their involvement in the case didn’t officially exist. And no one at the CIA had ever really told Gibbs not to share information. It might have been implied he shouldn’t but it was never stated directly that it was top secret—certainly not the way the FBI had made it plain Gibbs was to leave Ari Haswari the hell alone. Besides, everything that had gone on was fundamental to Fornell and the FBI’s renewed interest in Tony. God only knew where Kort and the CIA fit into all this mess.

Gibbs sighed silently. He thought starting with information Lundy already had, and expanding on it, would improve his chances for seeing Tony. If nothing else, he wanted it clear he wasn’t holding back. Gibbs had no doubts that Lundy would check with someone else, verify facts and details. It’s what he’d do in the other man’s place. And one lie might not be a death warrant, but Gibbs had a feeling it would keep him confined in the interrogation room for as long as Lundy could manage. He didn’t really want to speculate on just how long that might be.

Gibbs was honestly surprised that Lundy didn’t interrupt him once. The man simply listened, sipping his coffee, letting him talk. It was the first, and only, time Gibbs could remember being in an interrogation room speaking more than the other occupant. It was almost surreal.

When he stopped talking, Lundy sat back, amber eyes on the mirror, his expression thoughtful. Gibbs waited. He was somewhat surprised the blond didn’t immediately start asking questions, demanding more details and clarification, but then maybe he was smart enough to realize Gibbs had already told him everything he knew at this point. The team was still working, and they might have more by now, but Gibbs didn’t know that for certain. He hadn’t been in contact since getting off the plane.

“Anything else?” Lundy finally asked.

“That’s not enough?” Sarcasm was heavy in Gibbs’ tone. “Being accused of murder is usually plenty.”

“Might be plenty, but that don’t mean it’s everything.” Lundy’s gaze met his, calmly. “Nothing you’ve said so far really explains why you’re here.”

Gibbs stared at him. “What?”

“It’s not your case. It never was. When all this was going on, Tony was answering to someone higher up on the ladder. Even though shit tends to run down hill, you’re still in the clear. It won’t affect you, your team, or your career. You could have just as easily sat back in DC and let the FBI do their thing. Big question is why didn’t you.” Lundy leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table, fingers of both hands loosely folded around his coffee cup. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to help Tony.” Gibbs glared at Lundy, daring him to challenge his assertion.

“Why?”
“I take care of my people.”

“He’s not one of yours. Not any more.”

Gibbs managed not to flinch, but it was close. Lundy’s lips curled upward in the barest hint of a smile. “Guessing it isn’t just this case that brought you to Houston. Thinkin’ I was wrong earlier when I said it wasn’t personal.”

“And if it is?” Gibbs chin came up, eyes hard. He wasn’t going to tell Lundy...a stranger...that he knew he’d fucked up with Tony and hadn’t yet figured out how to make it right.

“Kind of a tetchy one, ain’t ya?” Levon’s smile grew.

“Tetchy?” Gibbs arched an eyebrow.

Lundy ignored Gibbs’ question. He sipped his coffee, and then leaned his chair back to the same two legged balancing act Gibbs hadn’t seen since Tony left NCIS. “You going to share?”

“Share?”

“Whatever it is that has you bristling up like a pissed off porcupine.”

“No,” Gibbs growled.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s between me and Tony and none of your damn business.”

“All right then,” Lundy sat forward, setting his chair squarely on four legs.

Gibbs frowned. He really hated the way Lundy seemed to find it so easy to keep him off balance. But in this case, Lundy was holding all the cards. He didn’t have to talk to Gibbs. That much was made crystal clear earlier. He knew more about Gibbs than Gibbs did about Lundy. He also knew where Tony was, and had the means to speak to him first. The entire situation was far from ideal from Gibbs point of view.

Gibbs waited for more questions, but none seemed to be forthcoming. “You’re going to let it go? Just like that?”

“Expecting me ta try draggin’ the answers out of you?”

“Frankly...yes.”
“Some times you can poke a rattler for fun, some times it’s best to leave them alone.” Lundy chuckled. “I’ve been pokin’ snakes long enough to know when all I’m going to get for my trouble is bit.”

Lundy rose to his feet, casually tossing his empty cup into a nearby waste can. Gibbs stood as well, feeling the need to face the other man squarely. Staying seated made him feel like he was at a disadvantage.

“You going to let me talk to Tony?”

“More like let him talk to you.” Lundy pointed to the mirrored glass. “He’s been watching since Roberto brought in the coffee.”

Gibbs couldn’t resist the urge to peek at the glass even though he knew all he’d see was his own reflection. He turned back to Lundy, giving him a dirty look. The blond just looked back at him, unperturbed.

“Here’s been there the entire time?”

“Yep.” Lundy nodded.

Gibbs reviewed everything he’d said. The bald facts he’d told Lundy were all things Tony needed to know. But had Gibbs known Tony was listening he would have tried to soften the blow about Jeanne accusing him of murder. Although, he wasn’t sure how to make that sound any less the act of a woman scorned. Gibbs just wasn’t that good with words. Still, he’d have tried.

Gibbs glared at Lundy. “Why the hell go through this song and dance? Why not just let me--”

“Because I asked him to.” Tony’s level voice neatly stopped Gibbs cold. He hadn’t even heard the other man open the door or step into the room.

Gibbs stared at Tony, anger suddenly taking a backseat as he drank in the sight of him for the first time in months. His hair was longer, closer to what it had been like when he’d first signed on with NCIS. The sun-bleached blond streaks and Tony’s lightly tanned were mute testament to time spent outside in the warmer climate. Tony looked younger somehow, freer than Gibbs could remember seeing him. He was lean and fit, with green eyes so vibrant they nearly glowed.

Tony gave Lundy a quick smile, one that was full of mischief. “Sold yourself short, Cowboy, you’re a great poker player.”

Suddenly Gibbs anger was back in full force. This was not a game. And he was not someone to be played with. Withoutthinking Gibbs raised his hand to cuff Tony across the back of the head only to find himself suddenly spun around and slammed into the wall with enough force to drive the air from his lungs.

“You should be grateful Joe is stuck in court today and it was me who got the call,” Lundy whispered in Gibbs’ ear as he twisted Gibbs’ arm higher and tighter against his back pinning him firmly in place. “Joe wouldn’t stop at just this.”
“Cowboy…Lundy…let him go. It’s okay.”

“Fucker tried to hit you.” Lundy punctuated that statement by trying to force Gibbs even closer to the wall he was already too close for comfort to. “That’s not okay.”

“He wasn’t going to hit me.”

“Like hell he wasn’t.”

“It was just a wake up call. A head slap. Nothing more.”

“Not much difference if you ask me.”

“Well, I’m not asking you. Now, let him go.”

Much to Gibbs surprise, Lundy let go. Gibbs turned around ready to finish was Lundy had started. The blonde’s stance was relaxed and easy. He looked wary but unafraid. Gibbs sized up his lean form, confident he could take Lundy but equally sure it wouldn’t be easy.

“You wanna dance?” Lundy asked, giving Gibbs a taunting smile. Gibbs was more than ready to go toe to toe.

“Stand down, Gibbs.” The directive wasn’t loud but it was firm, and there was no mistaking the fact it was an order that would have done Gibbs’ drill instructor proud. Gibbs looked at Tony honestly surprised to find the order had come from him. He was even more surprised to find himself complying with it.

Tony looked at Lundy. “Levon…knock it off.”

Lundy huffed out a breath, giving Tony a look Gibbs couldn’t read before he took a deliberate step backward. The set of his shoulders relaxed and his weight shifted into a non-threatening pose.

“He tries to hit you again, head slap or not, I will clean his clock.”

Gibbs wanted to tell Lundy he was welcome to try but he was glad he kept his mouth shut when Tony simply nodded his acceptance of Lundy’s declaration, adding a quiet ‘fair enough’. Gibbs had expected Tony to side with him, to have his back. That more than anything hammered home the point that while Lundy was a stranger to Gibbs, he wasn’t to Tony---and right now he held far more sway over Tony than Gibbs could lay claim to.

“Can we sit down now and pretend we’re civilized sorts?”

“I can if he can, Slick.”
Gibbs arched an eyebrow at the nickname. He knew Tony had a few in college...the whole ‘sex machine’ bit was far too memorable to be forgotten, but he hadn’t had any Gibbs knew about while working at NCIS. Tony had never even been saddled with the dreaded ‘Probie’ moniker.

Tony looked askance at Gibbs. He nodded once, taking the same seat he’d had before. Tony took the seat Lundy had been sitting in, facing Gibbs. Lundy sat next to Tony.

“Why didn’t you just talk to me?” Gibbs made eye contact with Tony and held it. “Why have me talk to Lundy? And why in here?”

“First thing I learned from you about conducting a good interrogation was you need to be in control of three things. Yourself, the space it happens in, and the flow of information.” Tony shrugged one shoulder. “I could get two, but not three. Lundy could. He could get you to talk because you don’t know him well enough to read him the way you could me and that gave him a lot more leverage. Not to mention the fact that he wasn’t lying about having people he could call. Or his being willing to hold you here—–”

“Until hell froze over if necessary,” Lundy interjected, with a tight smile.

Gibbs ignored him, keeping his focus on Tony. “It didn’t have to be an interrogation, DiNozzo. I came here to talk to you; it wasn’t like I was going to hide anything.”

Tony rolled his eyes, snorting delicately. “The entire time I worked for you, voluntary full disclosure was never your thing, Gibbs. Whether it was working with another agency or your team, you didn’t give up anything until you had to. I doubt much has changed in three months.”

Gibbs frowned. “I didn’t make things easy for the FBI or the CIA but I didn’t--.”

“You can write it off as trying to teach us how to think for ourselves or making us better investigators, but the end result was you horded information like a miser does gold.” Tony leaned forward, green eyes boring into blue. “Bottom line, Gibbs, for me to get as many details as possible, we both know it wasn’t going to happen during a quiet conversation over coffee. Especially since I can’t remember us ever having one of those. Heart to hearts weren’t exactly your style, so you’ll have to forgive me for not thinking you wanted to start doing that now.”

Tony sat back, his expression blandly neutral. “So what’s the rest? The bit you wouldn’t tell Lundy?” Tony cocked his head to one side. “There was never anything personal between us that I can think of. Certainly nothing to bring you all the way here.”

Gibbs’ jaw clenched hearing that calmly delivered statement. No self-pity, just a clear statement of fact. Tony really thought Gibbs saw him as nothing more than just another agent. Or maybe more accurately, a useful tool for busting the bad guys and little else. And after the La Grenouille case, he was relegated to some guy on Gibbs’ team who was no longer completely trustworthy. Shit. Shepard was right. Damn that bitch for seeing what Gibbs hadn’t.

“Why did you quit?” Gibbs countered rather than answer Tony’s question. He wasn’t ready to have an
audience for that conversation—at least not yet, maybe not ever. And he wanted to know more about what Lundy had alluded to earlier. Just what the hell had Shepard done that made Tony quit? It hadn’t been just Gibbs and the team; although they’d definitely done their share…it was more than that. The question was how much more.

Tony frowned. “Does it matter?”

Did it matter, Gibbs thought with a mental grimace, of course it mattered. He wanted to head slap Tony in the worst way. “Yes, it matters.”

Both Tony’s eyebrows rose. “Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

Tony looked confused. “There were no active cases when I left. And It’s not like I was needed or left you short handed. I’m sure there were a bunch of qualified agents ready to take my place. You probably had my position filled the day I left.”

“No,” Gibbs shook his head, “I didn’t pick anyone to—”

“Decided to stick with just McGee and Ziva then.” Tony nodded. “They work well together, and they always said they could do more without me around. Guess they are getting the chance to prove it.”

Gibbs blinked. They were joking. How could Tony not know that? He didn’t really think they’d been serious…did he? Shepard had pointed that out to Gibbs too but until now he hadn’t really believed her.

“You like and respect them.” Tony looked away before adding. “And you trust them. That’s a solid foundation for a good team. No reason to add someone new to the mix. Especially when you don’t really want or need anyone else.”

“What? No, Tony you don’t understand. It’s not—“

“Look, it doesn’t matter. It never did.” Tony shoved his chair back from the table. “Right now it’s better if we focus on the real problem, the FBI…and Jeanne.”

None of it showed on his face, but there was a wealth of pain and regret in Tony’s voice as he said her name. As much as Gibbs resented it being Lundy who reached out to squeeze Tony’s shoulder in a show support and comfort, he was damn glad Tony had someone who could do that much for him.

Tony got to his feet. “It’s probably best if I wasn’t involved directly in any inquiries. God only knows what those morons will make of my leaving, but no reason to add insult to injury by having me working as an obvious part of the investigation. That’s just asking for trouble.”

Gibbs tried again. “Tony—“
“Lundy, can you—“

“I got it, Tony. No worries.” Lundy gave him an understanding smile as he also rose to his feet. “I can make some calls. The squad can pull things together here.” Brown eyes met green, and something passed between them that Gibbs couldn’t follow. “Go home.”

“I can’t just—“

“Yes, you can.” Lundy raised a hand and cupped Tony’s cheek. “You trust me, right?”

“With my life.” Tony answered without hesitation.

For a moment, Gibbs was extraordinarily jealous finding himself on the outside looking in. There was a time when it would be him having that conversation with Tony. When he would have been the one Tony had looked to for help, the one he’d have sought out to fix the problem.

“And you trust Joe.”

It wasn’t a question, but Tony answered Lundy anyway. “Of course.”

“And Roberto, and Legs, and Esteban, and Annie, and—“

“Yes, yes, yes.” Tony laughed softly. “You made your point. I’ll go home.”

“Good boy.”

Tony held up a hand, pointing a finger at Lundy. “I expect you to fill me in.”

“Natch.” Lundy grinned, lightly patting Tony’s cheek before making a fist. Tony bumped it with his knuckles. “Tonight over dinner we’ll cover all the bases.”

“Thanks.” Tony turned toward the door.

“Tony.”

“Yeah, Cowboy?”

“Don’t run any farther or longer than the usual, ya hear?”

Tony gave him a wry smile. “Some days having someone know me so well sucks.”
“Yeah, I know the feeling.” Lundy raised two fingers in the same casual salute he’d given Nelson earlier. “And you’ll be the one explaining this to Joe.”

Tony grimaced. “Give me the easy job why don’t you.”

Lundy laughed. “Always.”

“Gibbs.” Tony nodded to him. “It was good to see you again.”

Gibbs moved toward the door, intent on stopping Tony only to find Lundy in his way.

“Let him go.”

“No.” Gibbs snarled at Lundy, prepared to use force to get by him if necessary.

“You’re poking a snake that’s going to bite you.”

“I’m not worried about you.”

“I’m not talking about me,” Lundy told him, shaking his head. “Anything you say will be wasted because he’s in no mood to hear it. Talking to him now will just piss him off. Better to bide your time and do it right.”

“I don’t need advice from you.”

“Well, it’s damned obvious you could use advice from someone.” Lundy stepped to the side, giving Gibbs a clear path to the door. “But don’t let that stop you. Go on and do it your way. Fuck it up even more. No skin off my nose.”

Gibbs hesitated. Lundy was right. Gibbs had seen Tony in this sort of mood before. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, talking to him never did any good. Gibbs eyed Lundy, not entirely sure he could trust him. The man had been ready to kick his ass only a few minute ago.

“Why would you help me?”

“Not you I’m helpin’, it’s him.” Lundy took a deep breath and released it. “I think you got stuff to say he could probably stand to hear…stuff that will fill the holes he likes to pretend aren’t there.”

Gibbs knew all about holes. He’d had his own share when Shannon and Kelly died, when he went to Mexico, when Tony left.

“You think there was something personal between you that needs to be talked about…and even though he denied it, pretty sure Tony agrees with you.” Lundy sighed. “Getting him to admit it...and sit down to hear
what you got to say…that isn’t going to happen if you push. He’ll just push back.”

“He should never have left NCIS.”

“Don’t agree with you on that one.” Lundy shrugged, expression unapologetic. “But if you want to convince him you’re right it would be better you bided your time. Pick the time and place when you might actually win the argument.”

Gibbs sighed, rubbing wearily at his eyes. This was not at all how he envisioned things going. He couldn’t honestly say what he had expected…he just knew this wasn’t it.

“You said you came to help Tony?”

Gibbs looked up. “I did.”

“Then how about you work the case here with us. We got some ducks that need to line up before the Feds show up and we have to go to D.C.” Lundy frowned, muttering darkly, “God, I hate D.C.”

“You’re okay with me working the case?” Gibbs blinked. Somehow he half expected to be locked in the interrogation room for the duration. He sure as hell wouldn’t have let an outsider work on something so important.

“We got the same goal, don’t we?”

“Yes.”

“A pissing contest would be counter productive,” Lundy stated practically. “We will get further working together. Unless, of course, you want to stay locked in here?”

“Hell no.”

Lundy grinned, nodding once. He headed out the door. “Then get your ass in gear, Gibbs, we’re burning daylight.”
When Gibbs called to check in with his team he nearly bit off McGee’s head when the other agent began to stammer nervously. It was Ziva who ultimately told Gibbs that Fornell had found Abby in her lab and was holding her for questioning at the Navy Yard. Gibbs was unclear why she was even at NCIS headquarters until McGee confessed she’d gone after some additional equipment he thought might make their efforts to hack into the FBI files easier to accomplish.

Gibbs would have preferred Abby not bear the brunt of Fornell’s investigation, but he knew she could hold her own. With the possible exception of Tony, she could give Fornell the run around like no one else on his team. In her case it wouldn’t even necessarily be deliberate; her hyper nature, odd point of view on things and tendency to start in the middle was bound to befuddle and confuse. Gibbs was somewhat relieved that she was going to be occupied for several hours. At least he wouldn’t have to explain to her how he’d gotten to see Tony and speak to him, but hadn’t fixed anything yet. Abby was so confident he could bring Tony home, Gibbs didn’t want to disappoint her.

Unlike Abby, McGee, Ducky and Ziva wouldn’t question him about his progress…or lack there of…when it came to Tony. They also wouldn’t question---at least not to his face---why he wanted them to share information with a team of detectives in Houston that they’d never met. As Tony had pointed out, Gibbs wasn’t exactly known for his willingness to cooperate with other agencies or departments, but in this case, he knew he didn’t have a choice. His desire to solve the case took a back seat to making sure Tony wasn’t accused again for a murder he hadn’t committed. And Gibbs really didn’t want Lundy to think he’d lied when he said he wanted to help. He got the distinct impression the Texas cop was a lot like him in that regard---he wouldn’t accept anything less than Gibbs’ best effort.

The team of people Lundy assembled made it clear they had only one objective. They were intent on taking care of one of their own. Gibbs understood that no one and nothing would be allowed to get in their way. The last thing he wanted was to be perceived as an enemy or obstacle to be removed.

While Lundy made phone calls to whatever contacts he had, Gibbs coordinated having his team share what they had so far. The Houston forensics expert, Annie Hartung, was every bit as competent and capable as Abby, even if she was nothing like her. Over the years Gibbs had grown used to Abby’s Goth style, tattoos and fascination with the macabre. He’d forgotten that not everyone working in forensics had similar quirks. But it wasn’t Annie’s professional attire or demeanor that surprised him, it was her wheelchair. Not being able to use her legs clearly hadn’t affected her cognitive ability. She had no difficulty keeping up with the techno babble McGee spouted off or creating an interface that allowed them to video conference and share information as easily as if they were in the same room.

That information share worked well for Ducky to confer with Dr. Amos Sixkiller, the local coroner. Sixkiller was of Native American descent and like Annie seemed capable and competent. He and Ducky had no trouble working together. Not that Gibbs expected they would. Ducky got along well with most people.

The ‘conference’ also worked well for bringing Carol Dewing and Roberto Mendez up to speed. Gibbs’ first thought when Lundy introduced Detective Dewing was ‘barbie doll’. She certainly had the looks, but
her sober expression and obvious intelligence made it clear she was no air-head bimbo. Other than a hard
look and a cold smile, she didn’t voice any objection to Gibbs’ involvement.

He wished Tony’s partner had been as accepting. Mendez had vehemently objected to Gibbs presence, dark
eyes flashing with fire whenever he looked at former Marine. It was only Lundy’s firm stance that Gibbs
could stay as long as he was useful that got the younger cop to grudgingly tolerate his presence.

After several hours, Lundy whistled sharply, halting all conversation. “Okay people, let’s review what we
got.”

“By the numbers?” Dewing asked.

“By the numbers,” Lundy confirmed. Gibbs wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but knew better than to
ask. He simply waited, watching the others in the room.

“Cause of death,” Sixkiller said, “was a single gun shot to the head. The location, powder burns and
stippling are consistent with a self inflicted wound. Initial autopsy called it as a suicide.”

Lundy leaned back in his chair, balancing on two legs. He crossed his arms over his chest. “You agree with
that call?”

Sixkiller shrugged, giving Lundy a helpless look. “With only photos and no body to work with it’s hard to
make a case for either suicide or foul play.”

“There is a bruise on the back of his hand,” Ducky offered, his voice carrying easily through the mic on the
computer monitor. Ziva added her theory on where it might have come from. Demonstrating for the group
exactly what a ‘love tap’ was and how it worked on McGee.

“It is not exactly conclusive, of course.” Ducky sighed heavily. “As Dr. Sixkiller already noted, we don’t
have a body to examine in greater detail. It leaves us at a serious disadvantage for arguing for or against foul
play.”

“Definitely generates some reasonable doubt.” Dewing pointed out. “Particularly in light of the first
conclusion being suicide and apparently no other examination of the body being performed. At least not that
we’ve found.” She grimaced. “Although, reasonable doubt only counts if the FBI plays fair.”

Lundy snorted. “You know better than to expect that, Legs.”

Gibbs blinked at the nickname. Kate would never have tolerated being referred that way. Ziva either.
Clearly Lundy’s people had a different view on such things. Gibbs wondered if everyone got a nickname.
He clenched his jaw remembering Tony already had one. If it was a mark of membership….Gibbs forced
his mind back on the case and away from how to get Tony to come back to NCIS. One thing at a time.

Lundy pursed his lips, his expression thoughtful. “Time of death?”
“It is notoriously difficult to be precise about that when it comes to floaters, especially if they’ve been in saltwater.” Sixkiller shook his head. “At best, they can say he’d been dead at least two days before they fished him out of the bay. The only reason they could possibly narrow it down any further was because they had a fairly solid time frame for when he was last seen alive. They wouldn’t even have that if it weren’t for NCIS involvement because I doubt the CIA would freely tell the FBI anything at all about their pet arms dealer.”

Roberto glared at Gibbs. Gibbs ignored him. It wasn’t his fault Shepard had a vendetta and had used Tony to try and make good on it, or that Rene Benoit had come to her for help thinking NCIS might be his only hope of getting out of the arms business. A little voice inside of him argued that if he hadn’t gone to Mexico none of this would have happened. If he’d questioned Tony directly about what he was doing and gotten involved sooner the out come could have been a lot different. If he’d just taken a closer look after he knew Jenny was obsessed with La Grenouille and made an honest effort to rein her in.

“So giving or getting an iron clad alibi is unlikely?” Lundy looked at Sixkiller but it was Ducky who answered the question.

“Short of being incarcerated and monitored continuously, it would be impossible to have a witness to one’s whereabouts for what amounts to nearly a twelve hour block of time.”

Lundy sighed. “What do we know about the weapon?”

“Based on the wound and the bullet found in his skull, Rene Benoit definitely died from a 9mm round.” Hartung repositioned her wheelchair so she was closer to Lundy, handing him a copy of the ballistics report. “According to that the gun they recovered near the scene was definitely used to shoot Rene Benoit. Can’t confirm that without testing it myself,” Hartung gave Lundy an apologetic look, “but I doubt the FBI would screw up such a basic test.”

“Any prints?”

“Not a one.” Hartung held up both hands in helpless gesture. “It was in the water long enough to obliterate or obscure any prints on the gun. But the serial number was easy to read. It’s registered to Jennifer Shepard.”

That little bit of news didn’t really surprise Gibbs. He’d suspected her from the beginning. Unfortunately, it being her gun didn’t automatically make her guilty. Gibbs said as much.

“But it should make her more of a suspect than Tony,” Dewing countered, cornflower blue eyes flickering toward Gibbs before dismissing him. “She certainly had motive and the means. And given how fuzzy our time of death is, she definitely had opportunity.”

“Agreed.” Lundy nodded. “What about the scene?”

“FBI believes he was killed on his boat, but other than a single casing there was no real evidence that is where it happened. No blood. No sign of a struggle.” McGee cleared his throat. “We ran a simulation and if he was shot on the boat, there are places where he could have been standing that would have left no blood splatter and would have resulted in his body being in the bay.”
“There would be places on the dock that would work just as well,” Roberto pointed out.

“Casing was on the boat,” Gibbs reminded him quietly, getting a dark look in return.

“None of Tony’s prints were found on the boat, although they did ID a number of other people,” Lundy said.

“That’s not in the case file.” McGee observed, his image on the monitor moving out of camera range as he went to double check his notes. “How do you know—“

“Talked to one of their techs,” Lundy replied, not giving McGee a chance to finish his question. “They didn’t dust until after they’d ID’d Benoit’s body which took two days.”

“Bloated fingers can be very difficult to work with,” Ducky stated with calm assurance.

“Not to mention the critters that might have been sampling.” Sixkiller added. “And his face…well, you’ve all seen the photos. His own mother might have had trouble recognizing him.”

“So what we’ve got is a crap case,” Hartung summarized, shaking her head and frowning

“That about sums it up.” Lundy nodded.

“Why are they even pursing this?”

“Because Benoit was important to some people and it would look bad if they didn’t.” Lundy sighed. “Not to mention the fact that Jeanne Benoit accused Tony of murdering him.”

“Her statement is all that makes him a suspect.” Mendez rolled his eyes. “Morons.”

On that, Gibbs could agree with Mendez. In light of all the evidence or lack thereof, any case against Tony would be weak at best. They stood a better chance of nailing Shepard since it was her gun. And Gibbs knew for a fact if he hadn’t taken the bullets out of her gun she would have shot him right there in her den. Fornell was no fool. Why tell Gibbs he was after Tony…unless he was hoping Gibbs would do exactly what he had set his team to do before he left…find conclusive proof about who killed Rene Benoit. The bastard, Gibbs nearly crushed his coffee cup. Fornell wanted Gibbs to solve the case for him.

“What about the daughter’s statement?” Lundy looked toward Dewing, once more drawing Gibbs attention back to the case. “Is it solid?”

She shook her head. “It’s got holes big enough to drive a truck through.”

“Line it out for me.”
“For starters, she didn’t tell the FBI he was murdered until after the informed her he was dead. One of the agents she spoke to said she seemed shocked to find out he was dead but rallied very quickly to give her story. His observations were later dismissed.”

“How did you find out that information?” Ziva asked, the monitor not diminishing the intensity of her gaze.

“Lundy got the original case notes faxed over.”

Lundy gave Ziva a smile and a two finger salute. “Pays to know people who know people.”

Dewing tapped a few keys, bringing up a three dimensional image on her computer, turning the screen so everyone could see it. “Assuming Rene was killed on his yacht...we reviewed the schematic of the dock and checked all possible light sources as well as line of sight. Lighting is limited, as are clear views of the deck of his yacht. It was also raining the night he died. So for her to see clearly enough to identify the man putting a gun to her father’s head, Jeanne would have had to have been on the yacht. But she clearly states she saw everything from the pier. It doesn’t wash.”

Dewing cocked her head to one side. “Knowing she couldn’t have ID’d Tony from the pier---then we’d have to assume she was on the yacht. And if she was, she’d have been close enough to the action to try and stop it. Nothing in her statement suggests she got involved. Which begs the question, why didn’t she?”

“Fear.” Ducky offered. “It’s been known to incapacitate many people.”

Lundy shook his head. “Tony said she had nerves of steel when it came to facing down an armed junky in the morgue at the hospital. Can’t think she’d suddenly freeze up when it came to protecting her daddy. Especially since everyone says she adored the man. Most of people don’t let a loved one go down with out a fight.”

Gibbs frowned. Junky in the morgue? When did that happen? Why hadn’t Tony said anything to him about it?

Hartung held up another page from the FBI file. “Her prints weren’t found on the boat. Find it hard to believe she didn’t touch something on that yacht. She wasn’t exactly an experienced sailor. She’d have gripped the railing at least once, braced herself on against the wall...something.”

“But he was seen boarding the yacht with a young woman,” McGee said. They’d all assumed at the time that it was Jeanne.

“According to Tony, Benoit had a pretty little number in his employ who went everywhere with him.” Lundy balanced precariously on his chair to reach and then hold up a photo of the blonde woman they’d seen with La Grenouille in Canada. “More likely it was her rather than the daughter.”

Gibbs kept the thought that the woman seen with Rene could have been Shepard to himself. From a distance it would be hard to tell her true age and she could easily have been mistaken for ‘young’.
“Why wouldn’t it be Jeanne?” McGee frowned, clearly puzzled.

“Because they tried to kill her by blowing up Tony’s car,” Gibbs stated, mentally cursing his lack of foresight. “He would have known having her stay close would be continuing to put her at risk.”

“That fits with the FBI’s theory on why Tony killed Rene.” Dewing rolled her eyes. “Supposedly offing Rene would keep Jeanne safe.”

“Can’t argue against his being dead definitely making it safer for her. She hasn’t been a person of interest for anyone since he died.” Mendez made a meaningless gesture with one hand. “But I can’t see Tony taking out her old man and then letting the love of his life just vanish without making sure she was going to be okay wherever she went.”

Dewing nodded in agreement with Mendez. “Nothing in her statement suggests she been in contact with Tony since the night Rene was killed. And he hasn’t tried to find her.”

“Anything else about her statement that sent up a flag for you, Legs?”

“If she was scared, as Dr. Mallard suggested…scared enough to do nothing and then run off to hide…what suddenly changed to give her enough courage to accuse Tony? Why come forward now?”

“Maybe she found out Tony wasn’t with NCIS,” McGee suggested.

Lundy shook his head. “FBI didn’t even know Tony had moved on. Doubtful Jeanne would have known any more than they did.”

“And if she really was afraid of him, she wouldn’t have agreed to go to D.C.” Ziva pursed her lips thoughtfully. “She certainly didn’t trust that the authorities would keep her safe months ago, why would she suddenly trust them now?”

“The whole thing just smacks of jilted lover or woman scorned.” Dewing shrugged one shoulder. “She didn’t see who killed her father; she’s accusing the one person she holds responsible for him being gone, the man who ruined her neat little world where Daddy was the good guy he always claimed to be.”

“Options?” Lundy asked.

Sixkiller spoke first. “The case is crap, but given that they are going to pursue it, I’d say Tony’s best bet is to face the FBI head on.”

Hartung nodded. “They have nothing which would really point to Tony that a good attorney couldn’t pick apart in ten seconds the same way we did, but it would be better for him not to be charged at all.”

Dewing and Mendez stated similar views. Neither looked happy with the idea of Tony going back to D.C.,
but both agreed it would be better for him to show up of his own volition rather than have the FBI come for
him.

“All right.” Lundy nodded, setting his chair squarely on four legs. “Annie, you tape all this?”

“Every word.” She held up a flash drive. “Loaded all the pictures and documents too.”

“Good.” Lundy took it from her and put it in his shirt pocket. “Won’t take much to bring Tony up to speed
then.”

Gibbs was suddenly reminded of Tony’s ‘campfires’. He wondered if Tony had gotten the idea from them
or if they’d gotten it from him. Gibbs would grudgingly admit this sort of ‘round robin’ discussion certainly
worked well for review of the evidence and brainstorming. He added it to the list of things he needed to say
to Tony.

“Okay, people, we do not want the FBI to know we’ve looked into this. So—“

“Shred the hard copies and make sure they are incinerated,” Dewing finished for him. She and Sixkiller
began gathering up all the documents and photos that had been printed out.

“Deleting soft copy now,” Hartung said. “The only copy you’ll have will be what NCIS has and what’s on
the flash drive I gave you.”

“Thank you, Annie.” Lundy gave her a smile before facing Gibbs. “Gibbs, you want to use the connection
to confer with your team before we cut it?”

“Yes, please.”

Lundy dipped his head. “When you’re done, you can meet me in the hall.”

“We’re going to see Tony then?”

“After I talk to Beaumont. Need to bring her up to speed before we get too far down the road.” Lundy gave
him a hard edged grin. “By the time we get to the ranch, Tony will have talked to Joe, and he might not be
quite so pissed at you. Wouldn’t bet on that though.”

“I’m not that easily intimidated.”

“Good.”

“Good?” Gibbs frowned. He really wished he could get a handle on Lundy. The man confused him.

“Tony needs someone who can step up to the plate.” Lundy gave Gibbs a measuring look. “He’s already
had plenty who quit when the going got a little rough. It’s one of the reasons he worked so many places before he signed on with you. When he stayed so long at NCIS, I thought you might be different.”

Gibbs straightened his spine, reacting to the disappointed tone. “I am different.”

“We’ll see.” Lundy pointed to the monitor. “Talk to your team. I’ll be outside.”

Gibbs grimaced. He had no idea what to say. But he had to tell them something.

Gibbs took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Ducky’s advice before he’d left came back to him, ‘honesty without hostility’. Maybe now would be a good time to apply that bit of wisdom. He nodded to himself. It wasn’t like he had any other ideas to try, and he couldn’t see Lundy waiting indefinitely for him to take care of business. He’d tell them the truth, give them a new set of tasks to focus on and hope for the best.

Suck it up, Marine, he told himself, you got work to do.

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Tony was glad Levon was taking his time coming home. It had taken the better part of an hour to get Joe to stop yelling and cursing in Italian. Not that Levon wasn't well versed in dealing with Joe's temper, or capable of handling it, but after spending most of the day with Gibbs, Tony didn't think Levon should have to. He'd rather Levon got to come home to the quiet house he knew the blond preferred.

Tony shook his head, watching from the porch swing as Joe continued pacing the length of the deck, dark mutterings audible as he moved. He was glad his cousin hadn't actually joined the family business; it wasn't hard to imagine Joe contracting a hit on the former Marine.

Tony wasn't entirely sure what made Joe angrier, the fact that Gibbs was in town at all or the fact that he was in Houston because Tony was being accused of killing Rene Benoit. Quite a bit of Joe's tirade had centered on Gibbs being a moron if he thought Tony was capable of premeditated murder. Tony had tried to point out that Gibbs wasn't in Houston to arrest him, nor did he appear to believe Jeanne's accusation, but his words fell on deaf ears. Joe clearly wanted to believe the worst of Gibbs.

Tony shook his head again, sighing silently. He almost regretted telling Joe and Levon everything about his time in NCIS. Right from the beginning they'd heard the best and the worst about his experiences as a federal agent. Of course, the bad outweighed the good toward the end. Tony could understand how it would be hard not to think the worst of Gibbs in light of all the shit that happened. Just the capricious way he'd quit only to return four months later, summarily demoting Tony and dismissing his efforts as acting team leader, had earned him a black mark in Joe's book that likely wouldn't be erased any time soon. The less than stellar treatment Tony had gotten after the La Grenouille case certainly hadn't helped any.

Tony was glad he'd started this conversation outside when Joe got home from testifying in court. It was definitely easier on the ears to let Joe yell where the volume wouldn't be contained inside four walls, and the nearest neighbor was far enough away not to hear him. Having the added space to move was also a plus. It gave Joe more room to vent his anger, long angry strides crossing the deck rapidly back and forth as he struggled to rein in his temper.

Tony had a new appreciation for Levon's ability to go toe to toe with Joe. The volume and vehemence the man could bring to bear was impressive. But then, Levon had a temper of his own that, in the early days of their partnership, rivaled Joe's. Tony bet their make up sex was just as explosive---not that he'd ever asked. It was far too personal and none of his business.

Tony waited patiently for Joe to wind down. He had learned some time ago it was better to just let his cousin rant and rave for a bit. He'd see reason after awhile, but the man needed to get it out of his system first.

When Joe stopped pacing, and stood still taking slow deep breaths, Tony knew the man was open to talking and actually listening to what he had to say. He waited a few more minutes, just to be on the safe side.

"You done?"

Joe gave him a dirty look before huffing out a soft laugh. "For now."

"Feel better?"

Joe snorted, running a hand though his dark hair. "Taking a page out of Levon's book are you?"
Tony's lips curled upward in a small smile. When not angry himself, Levon often did exactly what Tony had just done---let Joe run with the bit in his teeth until he wore himself out enough to see reason. And he inevitably asked the same questions Tony just had once Joe cooled down.

"It works."

"True." Joe shook his head, pointing a finger at Tony. "You tell him I said that and I will kick your ass."

"Your secret is safe with me." Tony held up his right hand in the traditional Boy Scout salute. "I promise."

"That would carry a bit more weight if you were actually a boy scout, Tony."

"It's not like he doesn't already know."

Joe smiled. "My Cowboy is no fool."

"No he's not." Tony gave Joe a level look. "You should trust him to handle Gibbs and the FBI."

"I do trust him," Joe glared at Tony but it lacked any real heat. "It's them I don't trust."

"The FBI might want to see me behind bars, but Gibbs doesn't."

"You sure about that?" Joe's piercing blue eyes measured Tony carefully.

Tony nodded. "He knows I didn't kill La Grenouille." He gave Joe a bitter smile. "Not sure I believe he's here to help me, because altruism isn't exactly a trait he was known for."

"Got that right." Joe growled. "You said the fucker had an ulterior motive, one he wouldn't tell Levon."

"It wasn't an ulterior motive." Tony rolled his eyes. Calling whatever other reason Gibbs had for wanting to talk to Tony that just made it sound...sinister. Gibbs might not have trusted him in the end, liked or respected him for most of his time at NCIS, but Tony didn't think the older man actually harbored any ill will.

"He said it was personal."

"And you said there is nothing personal between you," Joe pointed out.

Tony blinked, surprised Joe had actually heard that. He'd still been yelling at that point so Tony assumed most of what he'd said would have been in one ear and out the other, if it even registered at all.

"How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Remember what I said when you weren't even listening to me."

"Just because I don't acknowledge it doesn't mean I wasn't listening." Joe grinned. "If it's any consolation that drives Levon nuts too."

"And he still puts up with you?" Tony shook his head, in mock surprise, chuckling. "I didn't know he had masochistic tendencies."

"Nah, he just loves me."
"Put up with a lot from the ones we love." Tony smiled, knowing his cousin would realize he wasn't talking about just Joe and Levon.

"Do things for them we wouldn't do for anyone else," Joe agreed with a sigh. He gave Tony a resigned look. "I will play nice with Gibbs...if that's what you want." The way he said it made it clear Joe wouldn't like doing it, but he'd do it for Tony.

"Thank you." Tony stood up and pulled Joe into a hug.

"If he's an ass to you, I will hurt him," Joe whispered in Tony's ear before he pulled away enough to place a quick kiss on Tony's temple.

Tony smirked. It wasn't quite word for word what Levon had said but the sentiment was identical. It wasn't really hard to see why they were a good couple---when it came to what really mattered they agreed more than they disagreed.

"I can stand up for myself, you know?" Tony lightly punched Joe on the shoulder when he stepped back.

"I know you can." Joe grinned. "But you shouldn't have to stand alone. You're family, Tony. Not just mine any more either. Levon's all but adopted you. The squad too. We look out each other."

Tony nodded, his throat too tight to say anything. He never got tired of being reminded that looking out for their own wasn't just lip service in Houston. Tony didn't have to worry about being left out, ignored or dismissed as unimportant here. It was a novel feeling, and one he hoped never to take for granted.

"So you'll make dinner without poison?" Tony joked, when he could speak. Levon calling to tell Tony he was bringing Gibbs home with him so they could discuss the progress on the case was another thing that had pissed Joe off. It might have been even the thing that pissed him off the most, but Tony wasn't sure.

"I won't over season or add anything the recipe doesn't call for to his meal, but he's not getting any cookies."

Tony laughed. "That'll do."

Joe sighed deeply, his gaze shifting to look out over the paddock where Levon's horses stood, head to tail, keeping each other company. He leaned his forearms against the railing. "If you don't think he's here just to help you, and there isn't anything personal between you, why do you think he's here?"

"I'm not really sure." Tony bit his lower lip. He shrugged one shoulder in a restless motion before moving to stand next to Joe, mimicking his posture. He knew better than to think Joe would simply let that detail slip by without further discussion.

"He didn't act like he wanted to give me hell for how I quit. Pretty sure if he wanted to do that he wouldn't have waited three months. The man isn't exactly patient, and it's not like I was hiding."

The NCIS team tracked people down every day. Finding Tony should have been a piece of cake. He hadn't made any serious effort to hide his whereabouts and it wasn't like there weren't ample clues as to where he'd gone. His flight to Houston was hardly clandestine. Joe's name and number were listed in his file. All of his frat brothers knew about Joe and how close they were. He was fairly certain he was listed in the file the FBI had on Joe...at least as a footnote if nothing else.

Tony had gotten a new driver's license and the change would have been recorded in DC. Being hired as a cop would have been noted in several databases Abby, McGee and even Gibbs could have accessed with
ease. His small trust fund was also noted in his file; it wouldn't have taken much to pull the records and track the first large withdrawal he'd made in years. Tony used the money to buy another classic muscle car. It cost more than the insurance money from his Mustang, but he couldn't pass up getting the Pontiac GTO Judge. He rarely drove it, preferring to go to work with Joe and Levon, but he liked having his own set of wheels to use whenever he wanted.

Tony knew Beaumont had called Ducky and Lee to check his references. Tony had asked them not to mention his being in contact or his request for them to act as references, but he never told them not to say anything about getting a call from the Houston PD. If anyone asked, Tony didn't want them to feel like everything was off limits. It was too much pressure to put on people already doing him a favor. And he knew both Lee and Ducky were smart enough to recognize the loophole he gave them if they felt need to say something.

"Maybe he didn't want to chew you out in front of strangers," Joe suggested bringing Tony back to their discussion. "You don't dress down your people in public." Joe neatly imitated Beaumont's tone and inflection as he quoted her. It was one of the things Beaumont believed in rather firmly. She praised in public, chastised in private. She saw nothing to be gained from embarrassing anyone on her staff, especially in front of strangers. She preferred to motivate her people in ways that rewarded them rather than punished.

"Other people might ascribe to that philosophy." Tony smiled ruefully. "But Gibbs was never one of them.

"Bastard."

"And then some."

After a moment, Joe sighed softly, bumping Tony's shoulder with is own. "So he wasn't here to give you a piece of his mind. What else could have brought him to Houston?"

Tony pursed his lips. He had no clear answer. It was a mystery they probably wouldn't solve without actually talking to Gibbs. Tony shook his head. He didn't want to talk to the man. There wasn't anything he needed to say. And he doubted Gibbs had anything to say he needed to hear. The man had never been shy about speaking his mind the whole time Tony worked for him. He'd said plenty. He should be relieved Tony finally got the damn message. It had certainly taken him long enough.

Tony sighed. "He clearly didn't know anything about my conversation with Shepard. That definitely was news to him."

Joe raised both eyebrows. "Wonder just how she explained your leaving."

"My guess would be she didn't." Tony rolled his eyes. He couldn't see Shepard admitting to any wrong doing—ever. "She could always claim she didn't know anything about why I left. Even if she let them read the formal resignation I left on her desk....you know I make a point of not saying anything personal about anyone when I leave a job."

Tony knew from prior experience that personal comments would just come back to bite him in the ass. And nothing in the letters he'd left for Gibbs and his teammates said anything definitive about his reasons for leaving. He didn't want his final words to them to be petty or sound as though he was wallowing in self-pity. Shepard could easily have just pretended to be as clueless as everyone else.

"Or she could have gone on the offense if asked and pointed the finger at Gibbs and the team." Tony shrugged. "It's not like she didn't know I was unhappy with the way things were."

He scowled. She'd no doubt been looking for a weakness to exploit since the day she took the job. Things
were a little too ready for him to step in on the La Grenouille case, but at the time he'd attributed to Shepard just being good at pulling things together. It wasn't until later he realized she wasn't nearly as good as he thought or expected her to be. Hindsight was a bitch.

He sighed, shaking his head. "Sad thing is she was the only one who did notice."

"All the more reason to leave."

"True." Shepard may have been the final straw but she was far from the whole load.

Tony took deep breath and let it out slowly. "Gibbs didn't replace me."

"Which means what?" Joe asked, his tone gentle.

"The team is getting along just fine without me. They never needed me at all."

"Don't be an idiot." Joe frowned at him. "You were a damn good agent and one hell of a good guy. They'd be stupid not to miss you."

Tony flushed. "You're biased."

"Doesn't mean I'm wrong." Joe bumped his shoulder once more, smiling. "You are an asset to our team. That they are too fucking stupid to know a good thing when they got it just made life a hell of a lot better for us. You ask anyone on the squad, Tony," Joe's expression sobered, blue eyes unwavering as they met green, "they will tell you the same thing."

"You're good for my ego."

"As it should be." Joe nodded once firmly. "Maybe Gibbs is here to get all the details on why you left."

"Why would that matter now?" Tony asked. "It's been three months."

"If the FBI had any sense they'd be looking into the entire team...not just you. It's what we'd do."

"True." Tony nodded. He could see where Joe was going with his reasoning. If the FBI thought Tony killed La Grenouille, they might not think he acted on his own. Especially not once they got the whole story on Shepard's involvement. Not that Tony expected they'd get the whole story---but they'd get enough to make expanding the focus of their investigation a logical reaction. And that expanded focus couldn't help but center on Gibbs' team.

"So he's here to help me because it will help him and them." It made sense. Gibbs would want to keep his people in the clear, and the best way to do that would be to exonerate Tony. If Tony wasn't a suspect, the others likely wouldn't be either, or at least they aren't directly in the line of fire any more. That would be exactly the sort of 'looking out for his own' that Gibbs would do.

"We don't know for sure," Joe shrugged, "but it's a far more likely scenario than the bastard coming here to apologize for being an ass."

Tony nodded, disappointed with their conclusion but unable to find fault with it. It was far more likely that pigs would fly than Gibbs would apologize to Tony for anything.

"No matter what....you got nothing to worry about," Joe told him, his tone calm and confident.
"How do you figure that?" Tony arched an eyebrow.

"You didn't kill anyone." Joe smiled. "You got me, Levon and the rest of the squad willing to go to bat for you and prove you didn't. And even if Gibbs is here on some self-serving mission, the end result will still be in your favor because to do what he's here for, he's got to help you."

"That last bit isn't terribly reassuring." Tony snorted.

"Then focus on the first bit." Joe told him with a pragmatic tone that wouldn't have been unusual coming from Levon. It was more proof of the positive influence Levon had been on Joe.

Joe straightened up and slapped Tony on the back. "C'mon. Levon and the bastard will be here soon. We better get dinner started."

"You aren't going to call Gibbs that when he gets here are you?"

"I might." Joe grinned.

"You said you'd play nice." Tony reminded his cousin.

"Only as long as he does."

Tony shook his head. He wasn't laying odds on that one. "Don't put the good china on the table."

Normally, the fine bone china that Levon had inherited from mother was used for special occasions, and a guest, even one not exactly welcome, would warrant using them. But Tony didn't want to think about what it would cost to replace even one of those antique pieces if things got ugly at the dinner table.

Joe laughed. "Already way ahead of you, Slick."

"Paper and plastic?" Tony asked, looking appropriately aghast. Ordinarily Joe wouldn't even consider serving a sit down meal on or with anything but 'proper' dishware and utensils. A product of his upbringing, Joe viewed a host setting a place at the table for a guest with anything less than good quality as an insult.

"Got some leftover from when we had the team over for a cookout."

Tony shook his head as he followed Joe into the house. Gibbs wouldn't even notice the slight, but Levon would. And if little stuff like that kept the peace, Tony wasn't going to fight Joe on it. Besides, Tony was enjoying the warm and fuzzy feeling knowing Joe would choose to deliberately insult Gibbs, however subtly, in a show of support of him a little too much to worry about it.

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Gibbs found following Lundy's truck easy, but then the man wasn't trying to lose him. Gibbs suspected that had Lundy wanted to shake him, it wouldn't be hard for the Texan to pull off. The unfamiliar city and crazy drivers would definitely be to Lundy's advantage. And his truck had a lot more power than the rental car Gibbs was driving.

Lundy offered to let Gibbs ride with him and leave his rental car in the police garage, but Gibbs had declined. He didn't know the other man well enough to trust him behind the wheel. Even with his team, Gibbs opted to drive more often than not. And he was too unsure of Lundy to want to spend time in a confined space with him alone. Time in the interrogation room had already proven to Gibbs he wasn't operating at his best. He needed some time to recover his equilibrium and confidence.

Gibbs blinked in surprise as they headed out of the city and into the suburbs. He knew from what little Ducky was willing to let slip that Tony mentioned he was -staying with friends'. Gibbs had assumed by that Tony meant his cousin and possibly whatever girl LaFiamma was involved with. He expected that would mean a place in the city, something urban. Nothing in LaFiamma's FBI file or in Tony's history had led Gibbs to think either one would be interested in living in any area even remotely rural.

Gibbs unconsciously relaxed as he watched the crowded streets of the city give way to more open housing. The regular, ordered, cookie cutter structure of the burbs ultimately gave way to larger lots of varying size with a less regimented appearance. The same style of house wasn't repeated over and over. The lawns were well kept, but not manicured. Large trees bespoke of age and permanence that new developments simply couldn't hope to match for at least several decades. And the landscaping was more natural rather than looking like something done by a professional for a Better Homes and Gardens' cover. They were the sort of places that looked lived in, welcoming and comfortable.

Gibbs could easily imagine himself living in these older neighborhoods, but couldn't quite envision Tony liking it. It wasn't quite the boondocks, but it was far from the hustle and bustle of the urban environment Tony had thrived in when he lived in Baltimore and D.C.

Lundy pulled into a driveway of a ranch style house with a two car garage. A small barn was off to the left and slightly behind the house. A pair of horses grazing in the adjacent pasture lifted their heads, ears flickering forward in interest before they once more resumed grazing. Gibbs thought maybe they belonged to a neighbor. Nothing in LaFiamma's file indicated any affinity for or interest in horses.

Gibbs pulled in behind Lundy. He got out of the car, discreetly stretching out kinks from the drive. Getting no sleep the night before, flying into Houston and then working all day had left him feeling a stiff and sore. He didn't show any weakness by letting those aches and pains show, but Gibbs couldn't help feeling envious when Lundy got out of this truck and executed an obvious stretch, arms overhead, vertebrae popping as he did it. He resisted the urge to give the man a dirty look when he sighed in satisfaction. The smirk he got from Lundy told him is effort at restraint was wasted. I could hate you so easily, Gibbs thought darkly.

Gibbs sighed, reining in his thoughts. No point in making an enemy of the one person in Houston who seemed at least somewhat inclined to help him.

Gibbs looked around as he walked to where Lundy waited. Everything was neat, clean and well maintained. There was an obvious sense of pride in ownership without being showy. Gibbs couldn't help but approve.

"Nice place."

"Thanks." Lundy smiled. "I like it too."
Gibbs blinked. "I thought this was Joe's house."

"Belongs to both of us."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. It wasn't uncommon for partners to be close, but owning real estate and living together was...unusual. Gibbs wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He shrugged, following Lundy to the front door.

Lundy stepped inside. He called out in a sing-song, "Honey, I'm home."

"Hey, Cowboy."

A tall, dark haired man stepped out of the kitchen. Having seen his picture, Gibbs immediately recognized Joseph LaFiamma. He hadn't seen any resemblance to Tony in the photo, but there were similarities in the way LaFiamma moved, and the wary, slightly hostile expression on his face when he saw Gibbs definitely matched the one Tony had worn at their first meeting in Baltimore.

"Joe, this is Special Agent Gibbs."

Cold turquoise eyes measured Gibbs. The former Marine felt like he should ready himself for a blow, and unconsciously shifted his weight in preparation. But Joe didn't lash out. He simply nodded in response to Lundy's introduction.

"Tony mentioned he'd be coming with you." Joe's voice was deep and even, his accent readily betraying that he wasn't native to Texas.

"Good." Lundy grinned, bright and hard. "That means no blood on the floor."

The statement was both a request and a warning. The only other person Gibbs had ever heard successfully blend those two things was Shannon. And they'd been married a good three years before that skill even registered with Gibbs. It piqued his curiosity again about just how close Lundy and LaFiamma were.

He also got the distinct impression that their initial greeting would have been different if he hadn't been there. Something in their body language suggested an aborted action. Gibbs couldn't quite pin down what made him think so, but his gut was telling him there was more to Lundy and LaFiamma than he was seeing.

Before he could really figure it out, Lundy completed the introductions. "Gibbs this is Joseph LaFiamma."

Gibbs held out his hand. He half expected LaFiamma to do something stupidly macho like try to size him up by squeezing the hell out of his hand, and he'd be in for a rude awakening if that was the case. LaFiamma's handshake was firm, but there was no effort to turn it into anything more.

"Dinner ready?" Lundy asked as he turned to hang up his Stetson on a hook near the door.

Something in the kitchen smelled delicious. It made Gibbs' mouth water. A few of the Houston cops had commented how lucky Gibbs was to be eating a dinner LaFiamma made. They thought very highly of his ability to cook. Gibbs hoped the man wasn't the petty sort who would spit in his meal out of spite. Not having anything more for breakfast than a bag of pretzels and nothing but coffee for lunch, Gibbs was hungry.

"Just about." LaFiamma gave Lundy a speculative look. "You skipped lunch, didn't you?"

"I had a candy bar."
"And at least a dozen cups of coffee." LaFiamma snorted. "That's not the same as having lunch, Levon."

"Was enough, Joe." Lundy shrugged. "Not like I'm going to starve."

"Right, because staving off the threat of starvation is the only reason any of us eat." LaFiamma rolled his eyes. "You're as bad as Tony."

"I am not." Lundy laughed softly. "He'd have ordered pizza."

"Like barbeque is so much better." LaFiamma grimaced. "You and Tony will ever convince me that either one of those constitutes a real meal."

"Ye of little faith." Lundy smiled. "We're wearing you down."

"Don't bet on it, Cowboy."

Lundy chuckled. "Speaking of Tony, where is he?"

That was what Gibbs had wanted to know the moment he'd stepped inside the house. There hadn't been any sign of Tony since meeting him at the office. Gibbs didn't think Lundy would have lied to him, but had no illusions about LaFiamma being willing to keep Tony hidden away. The man kept sending dark looks his way even while bantering with his partner.

"He's in the kitchen."

Gibbs forced himself to let LaFiamma and Lundy lead the way. He didn't want to look too eager or overly anxious. He wasn't even sure why maintaining an image mattered, but Gibbs had been doing it for so long he no longer questioned it.

The kitchen had a warm, open feel to it, with enough space to eat in. A beautiful oval table Gibbs thought might be chestnut and undoubtedly an antique took up one corner. Four matching chairs, with intricate geometric diamond shaped inlays of a lighter wood that matched the maple cabinets and sandstone tile flooring, surrounded the table. Another two chairs stood off to one side, side bracketing a well stocked wrought iron wine rack. The chandelier that hung over the table was also wrought iron. It provided sufficient light to see by without being too harsh or overly bright while adding a rustic element that nicely complimented the wine rack, as well as the pot rack that hung over the butcher block island. Copper pots and pans hung from the rack, gleaming duly. They were obviously well cared for and frequently used. Ultramodern appliances with a brushed stainless steel finish should have looked a bit out of place, but didn't. The overall impression was a well appointed, comfortable kitchen any chef would enjoy using and a room that encouraged people to make themselves at home and linger over a good meal.

All of those details were things Gibbs noticed secondarily. His primary focus was on Tony. He seemed completely at ease, moving around the table to set it with what looked like paper plates and plastic utensils.

Lundy eyed the table. He traded amused glances with Tony before smirking and looking askance at LaFiamma. The other man just shrugged and muttered something Gibbs didn't quite catch. Whatever LaFiamma said, it made Lundy snicker.

Tony grinned, clearly understanding the joke. Gibbs wasn't sure if it was at his expense or not, but he suspected it was. It hurt to find himself once more on the outside. Tony had clearly been in Houston long enough to form close attachments that rivaled anything he might have made at NCIS.
"Hello Tony," Gibbs offered his greeting quietly, unsure if he should draw attention to himself or not, but unwilling to put off being able to talk to Tony any longer.

"Gibbs." Tony's voice was without inflection; it wasn't warm or cold but it made Gibbs wince just the same. Tony had never been neutral toward him before. There was always emotion...anger, relief, surprise, desperation, pride, happiness, smug superiority... something. Tony had never sounded flat or disinterested.

There was silence. Gibbs didn't know what to say---especially not in front of an audience. And it didn't look like Tony knew what to say either. Shit. This was not quite how Gibbs expected things to go, but then he didn't usually have to talk. Other people did it for him. He suddenly missed Abby and Ducky intensely. They would have known what to say, known what to do. Hell, Abby would have just hugged Tony, and started babbling a mile a minute. And Ducky was never on the outs with Tony. Tony had stayed in touch with him at any rate, ignoring everyone else. Gibbs thought he should have brought one of them with him. They would have been able to handle Tony's wary attitude, hostile coworkers and over protective friends.

"You want a beer?" Lundy asked, turning toward the fridge. The question wasn't directed at anyone in particular, but Gibbs answered anyway, grateful the blond broke the silence before it became any more awkward.

"Yes, thank you."

"Slick?"

Tony nodded. "I'll have one."

Gibbs fought back a grimace at Lundy's use of that nickname again. He didn't like how easily Tony accepted and responded to it knowing it was another indication of how close to these men Tony was.

"Joe?"

"I'll stick with water, thanks."

Lundy nodded. He pulled out three beers and a bottle of water. He twisted the tops off each beer with a quick flick of his wrist, carelessly tossing the metal discs into a garbage can that sat at the end of the kitchen counter. He offered one to Gibbs, before moving to offer one to Tony. He handed the bottle of water to LaFiamma.

"Can we eat now, or did you guys want to stare at one another some more?"

"Asshole." There was no heat in Tony's insult. Too much amusement danced in his eyes for him to really mean it.

"Guilty." Lundy saluted Tony with his beer. "I'm also hungry. And if we're going to spend time talking about the case, which I know you and Joe are just dying to ask about, I'd like to do it over food. Can we do that?"

"Sure, Cowboy."

Gibbs was mildly surprised to find himself seated across the table from Tony until he realized that the position also left Lundy and LaFiamma on either side of him. His seat also put the most physical distance between him and Tony. The look that passed between Lundy and LaFiamma made it clear the seating arrangement hadn't been preplanned but it wasn't exactly accidental either. While Gibbs didn't appreciate being seen as a threat to Tony, he couldn't help approving of their efforts to watch his back.
Stuffed pork chops, scalloped potatoes, peas and what had to be a basket of home made rolls made their way around the table. There was no hesitation on Tony or Lundy's part to dig in, so Gibbs figured it was safe for him to do likewise. The cops hadn't lied when they said LaFiamma was a damn good cook. Everything was delicious. Gibbs found it odd that someone with such a reputation wouldn't have real silverware or plates, but then he normally considered coffee a meal, he wasn't really one to judge.

For several minutes the only sounds being made were those of hungry men eating. Gibbs was relieved that the earlier tension seemed to have past.

"So how strong is the FBI's case?" LaFiamma asked, after wiping his mouth with a napkin and taking a sip from his water bottle.

"I got everything on a flash drive for you both to look at later." Lundy made eye contact with Tony. "But they don't have enough to charge you with anything. And they sure as hell don't have enough to even consider going to trial."

"You agree with Levon, Gibbs?" Tony asked.

Gibbs nodded, pleased Tony looked to him for confirmation. Maybe Tony hadn't completely lost faith in him. "Other than Jeanne's statement, they don't have evidence to put you at the scene."

Tony grimaced, shaking his head. "Hell hath no fury." He sighed deeply, a sound heavily laced with remorse. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

LaFiamma reached out, long fingers curling around Tony's wrist. "We know."

Gibbs half expected LaFiamma or Lundy to try and excuse or justify Tony's actions—he was undercover, it wasn't personal, he wasn't a bad guy, he hadn't done anything wrong, there was no reason for him to feel guilty. But the former Marine quickly realized the gesture and simple, honest statement of support and understanding was really what Tony needed. And it was far more than he'd gotten from his NCIS teammates.

He had no idea what Ziva might have said to Tony in the men's room, but he doubted it had come close to being any where near as supportive. Not if the end result was her expecting Tony to apologize to her. And to the best of his knowledge the only thing McGee had offered was advice on Tony getting back into the dating game. Gibbs, Abby and Ducky had essentially ignored how Tony might have felt about what had happened with Jeanne.

Tony cleared his throat, and looked away. "I did love her."

"We know that too," Lundy offered quietly. "This wouldn't hurt if you didn't."

Tony sighed again, shaking his head. "What a cluster."

"Yep." Lundy agreed.

Gibbs realized that simple acknowledgement of the situation, given without condemnation was more than any of the team had given Tony. They'd blamed him for keeping the operation a secret. None of them admitted to understanding or accepting that Tony had been in an awkward position. Or how difficult following the Directors' orders might have been for him.

LaFiamma patted Tony's arm and then let go. He looked toward Lundy. "You think the FBI will try to make
"Don't think they really want to put a case together. At least not one against Tony." Lundy sipped his beer, sitting back in his chair. "I'm thinking the lead agent-

"Fornell," Gibbs interjected.

"Fornell," Tony repeated, eyebrows climbing. "Christ on a crutch doesn't that man ever give up. He already tried to jail me once and now-

"He's after bigger fish and likely using you to get her," Lundy stated calmly, cutting Tony off before Gibbs could.

"Her?" Tony frowned.

"Their best suspect is the Director of NCIS." Lundy's tone was matter-of-fact.

"Jenny?" Tony's jaw dropped. "You really think they are after her?"

"She had motive, means and opportunity. And it was her gun that killed him. That alone, under normal circumstances, would make her a prime suspect. Her position as director of a government agency no doubt brought them up short. They got to talk soft until they get themselves a damn big stick." Levon shrugged one shoulder. "I'd say this Fornell is using Jeanne Benoit's statement and you as the focus of the investigation as a red herring so he can look a lot closer at Shepard. And anyone else on the team who might have been involved."

Gibbs blinked. Lundy hadn't said anything like that during the team's review of the evidence, but Gibbs should have realized such an obvious ploy wouldn't have gotten by everyone. Hell, he'd figured it out in that room. There was no reason to think Lundy couldn't do the same---especially if he had contacts with the FBI who'd let more slip than just original case notes.

"So do we take them head on or wait?" LaFiamma asked.

"General feeling of the team was it would be best for Tony to go back to D.C. Take on the FBI on their home turf and make it clear he isn't hiding anything or trying to outrun them or whatever else they might want to read into his leaving NCIS."

"He's not going to deal with them alone." LaFiamma declared flatly.

Tony glared at his cousin. "I can take care of myself-"

"You shouldn't have to," LaFiamma argued, giving Tony a fierce, defiant glare of his own.

"My team will be there." Gibbs said. "He won't be alone."

"Oh yeah, that's reassuring." LaFiamma's glare switched focus. "You were there when all this was going on and didn't see a fucking thing."

"Joe, let it go. It's not his fault."

"Bullshit, Tony." LaFiamma hissed. "And even if it's not his fault, he sure as hell didn't do much to make it better."
Gibbs bit back the urge to lash out at LaFiamma. It wasn't like he hadn't realized his own culpability. Both Ducky and Shepard had taken pains to point it out to him. And Tony's leaving had certainly made it hard to ignore just what an idiot Gibbs had been. But it wasn't going to help Gibbs' efforts to make things right to have LaFiamma pointing it out again.

"He's here now," Lundy remarked calmly.

Not quite the ringing endorsement Gibbs would have liked to hear, nor was it from the person he would have liked to speak up for him. But it was more than he'd expected to hear from Lundy, and it was probably more than he deserved.

"Too little, too late." LaFiamma shook his head.

"Would only be too late if Tony was dead," Lundy countered. "And it remains to be seen if it's too little. - Sides, it's not your call to make."

LaFiamma opened his mouth, clearly ready to protest. Lundy stopped him cold with two words. It sounded like a name. Gibbs didn't recognize it but it made LaFiamma close his mouth with an audible snap. He gave his partner a look that would have been deadly if it were possible for looks to be lethal. Gibbs eyed Tony, hoping to see some clue in the younger man's expression, but the name apparently didn't mean anything to him either. Tony's gaze shifted back and forth between the two partners.

"Joe?" Not getting a response from him, Tony turned toward Lundy. "Levon?"

"S'okay, kid." Lundy kept his attention on LaFiamma. There was no anger in his expression, but it was clear he wasn't backing down either from whatever gauntlet he'd thrown in front of his partner. "Just serving Joe a little crow with his dinner. No big deal."

Joe rolled his eyes, huffing out a breath. All the anger of a moment ago was suddenly gone as if it had never been. Gibbs wondered if the man always switched gears so fast or if it was just with his partner.

"I hate you."

"No you don't." Lundy smiled warmly. "You just hate it when I'm right."

"Fortunately it doesn't happen all that often." LaFiamma smirked.

Lundy chuckled. "You just keep telling yourself that, boy."

"We are going with Tony, though, aren't we?" It was not really a question.

"Already called Ezra." Lundy nodded. "He said we could borrow the jet."

Tony frowned. "Who's Ezra?"

That was exactly what Gibbs wanted to know.

"He's an old friend. He---"

"Owes you a favor." LaFiamma and Tony said at the same time, both of them laughing.

Lundy shrugged, color warming his cheeks. "One or two."
LaFiamma shook his head. "I'm telling you, Tony, everyone he knows owes him."

"Not everyone." Lundy chuckled. "But if you'd rather fly coach and pay through the nose to do it, I can always tell Ez we changed our minds."

"Don't you dare! I love Gulfstreams."

Tony sounded so much like a little boy it made Gibbs smile. He'd forgotten about Tony's fondness for the expensive, private jets. His smile faded. Clearly Lundy was aware of Tony's fascination with them. He really hated feeling like he was constantly playing catch up.

"When do we leave?" Tony asked.

Gibbs was tempted to tell him -right now.' Lundy answered before he could.

"Whenever you want."

Tony grimaced. "Would rather not go at all."

"You don't have to go. You could wait for them to come to you," LaFiamma said, and Gibbs nearly bit his tongue to keep from contradicting him. He wasn't in a position to force Tony to return to D.C. no matter how much he'd like to.

Tony took a breath and let it out slowly. "It'll be better if I go."

"Probably," Lundy agreed, trading a look with LaFiamma. "Still your call, Slick. We'll back you no matter what you decide."

"Thanks."

Lundy gave Tony a two-fingered salute. "No problem."

"Any time, Tony." LaFiamma seconded his partner's sentiment.

"I don't want to give Fornell any more reason to fuck up my life than he already has. So D. C. it is I guess." Tony sounded more certain of his decision than he looked. His gaze fixed on Lundy. "You have that flash drive?"

Lundy pulled it from his shirt pocket, offering it to Tony. "Forewarned is forearmed." Before giving it to Tony, Lundy nodded toward Gibbs. "He can go over it with you while Joe and I clean up."

LaFiamma seemed ready to protest but a firm look from Lundy stopped him from saying anything. It really was a neat trick. Gibbs once more found himself wondering just how close they were. The only person who'd ever quelled him with a look was Shannon.

Tony's jaw tightened. "You're about as subtle as a sledgehammer."

"True. But subtle doesn't seem to work on either one of you. At least not so I'd noticed." Brown eyes met angry green. "He's not going to tell you whatever else it is that brought him here with an audience. And he's not going to leave without saying it. Best thing is to put you both in a room together and let you work it out. God knows he isn't going to do anything to make that happen."

"He's right here," Gibbs all but snarled, angry with being talked about as though he wasn't and not at all
happy about being forced into a corner. "I can speak for myself."

"Good. They you shouldn't have any trouble talking to Tony."

Gibbs glared at Lundy. He really could learn to hate him so easily.

"Tony was right. You are an asshole."

"Yeah, I know." Lundy grinned, not at all insulted. He also wasn't intimidated or repentant.

"You want to talk to Tony or not?" Lundy's expression turned serious. "Because if not, then you can get the hell out of our house. There's no other reason for you to be here. You already know everything we know about the case and that Tony is going to go back to D.C. You and yours will be off the hook. And if that's all you wanted or needed, Joe will be more than happy to show you the door."

"Damn straight." LaFiamma looked decidedly eager to do throw him out.

"No." Gibbs snarled. This was the second time Lundy had backed him into a corner. He didn't like it any better than he had the first time. And damn the man for actually putting in a position where could do the very thing he'd been trying to do since landing in Houston.

"I need to talk with Tony. Alone."

Tony snorted. "If this about the case-"

"It's not."

Tony frowned. "I don't need to-"

"Yeah, you do." Lundy cut him off. A look passed between them, one Gibbs couldn't decipher.

"Don't assume you know what he's got to say." Lundy spoke softly. "You'll never learn anything if you think you already know the answers."

Gibbs nearly gaped in astonishment. Ducky had said almost exactly the same thing. It would be dangerous if those two ever got together. At least Lundy wasn't prone to telling long winded stories.

"He came all this way, Tony, hear him out."

"Why the hell should I?" Tony's fist hit the table. "I don't owe him a damn thing."

"No, you don't. You owe it to yourself." Lundy leaned forward. "Once we get on the plane for D.C. you're going to be too focused on the case to have time to deal with him. I know you....it will be like an itch you can't scratch. Better to take care of it now."

"I don't want to take care of it at all."

"Him being here doesn't really give you much choice."

"He's never given me a choice."

Gibbs flinched. There was no anger in that statement, only resentment, resignation and disappointment.
"You got something to say, fine." Tony stood up from the table, his chair scraping loudly against the floor as he shoved it back. "We'll talk outside."

Tony stepped out on to the deck, not looking back. Gibbs got up more slowly from the table. The deck wasn't exactly private, not with the doors open to the kitchen, and Gibbs seriously doubted either Lundy or LaFiamma would close them. He had a feeling Tony picked the deck for just that reason.

"I thought you said talking to him when he was pissed was a bad idea," Gibbs said, raising an eyebrow at Lundy. "If I pushed, he'd just push back."

"No, I said he wasn't in the mood to hear you then so it was a waste of time. And you didn't push, I did."

"You think he's in the mood to hear me now?" The sarcasm dripped from his tone. Tony didn't exactly look receptive to Gibbs. "That he gives a damn who did the pushing?"

"I didn't invite you to dinner just to eat. And you can't honestly tell me you came here just for a free meal." Lundy cocked his head to one side. "He's had a few hours to stew on what -personal' reason brought you here. I know he's got some questions. And you got a few of your own. So go talk to him."

Lundy shrugged. "Besides, he's more pissed at me than he his at you. Least for the moment. Imagine whatever it is you got to say might change that."

Brown eyes measured him. "Just so you know...what I said earlier about those head slaps, it still applies."

He could feel LaFiamma's eyes on him as well, studying him. LaFiamma might have been civil but there was no mistaking the fact that he clearly didn't like Gibbs. He'd probably jump at the chance to back his partner up. Gibbs had no illusions as to why LaFiamma hadn't hit him earlier. Had Lundy not been there, it was a sure bet blood would have been spilled. Clearly LaFiamma saw him as the bad guy in all of this. Gibbs really wished he could say LaFiamma was wrong to think so, but he couldn't.

Gibbs glared at Lundy again. "I don't like being backed into a corner."

"No one does." Lundy pointed toward the front door. "And you're not in a corner. You can still leave. Reckon that's why you drove yourself. So you could leave whenever you wanted."

Oh he could leave...if he wanted to lose any chance of making things right and getting Tony to come back to NCIS. If he left now Tony would think the only reason he was ever there was the case. He likely thought that already. And if he didn't put things right...Abby and Ducky would make his life a living hell, McGee and Ziva would know he failed to shoulder his responsibilities, Shepard would get to smugly tell him -I told you so'. He wasn't going to get a second chance. Leaving was not an option.

Gibbs really hated Texas, Houston in particular, and everyone in it. He squared his shoulders. He wasn't going to let down his team. He wasn't going to fail Tony again.
Gibbs and Tony talk.

Tony stared out into the distance, not really seeing anything as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wanted to be pissed at Levon for putting him in this situation—except Levon wasn’t doing this to be an asshole. He was trying to help, and Tony knew that. It was Gibbs’ motives Tony wasn’t sure of.

Tony didn’t turn around when he heard Gibbs step out on to the deck. He knew it was him, not Joe or Levon; the scent of coffee and sawdust were a dead giveaway. Tony frowned, idly wondering how that combination could still be in play. Gibbs couldn’t have done any woodworking in at least the last 24 hours. And he hadn’t had coffee with dinner.

Tony turned to face his old boss. He’d have bet money that Gibbs would have chosen to leave rather than be forced into talking to him. Gibbs wasn’t known for letting anyone dictate his actions. Tony smiled to himself. He had to hand it to Levon, the man certainly knew how to make things happen. Tony knew it wasn’t fair to manipulate people that way, but then Levon did what he thought was right for anyone he cared about and fair wasn’t always a prime consideration.

If he wasn’t still a little pissed, Tony might have felt sorry for Gibbs. He wasn’t sure what the other man expected when he came to Houston, but Tony was fairly certain what he’d gotten so far wasn’t it.

Tony leaned back against the railing, folding his arms over his chest. He kept his expression neutral, giving away nothing. Tony knew Gibbs expected him to say something. Unless it was to dress him down for some reason, it was usually Tony who spoke first. Tony decided he’d just keep his mouth shut and let the older man to begin.

Gibbs moved toward him. Tony resisted the urge to move away. He wasn’t going to give Gibbs the satisfaction of letting him know how uncomfortable his getting closer made him. He wasn’t afraid of Gibbs, but he was on guard, not knowing what Gibbs wanted from him.

Tony realized he must have telegraphed his unease because Gibbs stopped well out of striking distance. It occurred to Tony that he might not have given away anything as much as Levon’s earlier action in the interrogation room could have made Gibbs cautious. Levon and Joe were not standing in the doorway watching—and Tony was grateful they’d offered at least the illusion of privacy—but he had no doubts they’d be monitoring this conversation. Gibbs was likely equally aware of that fact. Gibbs might have thought discretion the better part of valor and elected to stay far enough away from Tony so as not to incur any more interaction with Joe and Levon.

Knowing Joe and Levon wouldn’t be totally ignoring them should have annoyed Tony. He didn’t need babysitters, but Tony found it comforting to know he wasn’t flying solo. It was decidedly reassuring to know he had back up he could call on if he needed it.

Levon was obviously not totally against Gibbs, or he wouldn’t have forced this conversation to happen, but he was still clearly in Tony’s corner. Hell, Levon had put Gibbs into the wall earlier for trying to head slap Tony; it was the only time Tony could remember anyone going to that extreme to stand up for him with Gibbs. Joe obviously wouldn’t hesitate to stand beside him, ready to kick Gibbs’ ass. But he was also
willing to respect Tony’s wishes and make nice…with a little re-enforcement from Levon. It wasn’t entirely unexpected that Levon would have to add his two cents to keep Joe in line. Tony’s cousin was hotheaded, but his heart was in the right place. Tony made a note to ask exactly what that bit at the table had been about between Joe and Levon.

Tony watched Gibbs as he continued to wait. Gibbs still hadn’t said anything. He almost looked uncertain, but Tony chalked that up to the lighting. He’d never known Gibbs to hesitate or lack confidence. But then he’d never seen Gibbs forced into anything without reacting with a display of anger either. It was definitely a day of firsts.

After several minutes, Tony huffed out a breath, annoyed with Gibbs’ silence. Evidently whatever the hell it was Gibbs had to say it wasn’t too important or terribly pressing. Tony moved to step around Gibbs, heading for the door. If Gibbs didn’t want to talk, he had things to do before they flew to D.C.

“Tony…wait.”

“Does that mean you plan to actually say something or am I supposed to read your mind?” Tony turned to face Gibbs. “If it’s the latter, then now would be a good time to mention my physic powers are rather limited.”

Gibbs jaw tightened. He looked like he wanted to give Tony a head smack. Tony’s eyes narrowed. He might have defended that action earlier, brushing it off as no big deal, but he was in no mood to be so forgiving now.

“You’re not making this easy.”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to.” Tony arched an eyebrow, holding his hands out, palms up and a classic ‘what’ gesture. “What exactly do you want me to do? I don’t have a clue as to why you wanted to talk to me or what it was you wanted to say. I gave you time to tell me, you apparently don’t feel the need to use it.”

Gibbs growled, fingers curling into fists and then opening again. “I want to know why you quit.”

Tony frowned. Gibbs had raised that issue before, but Tony hadn’t answered him. He’d talked around the question then---not deliberately, he just couldn’t see why it would matter to Gibbs.

“Why do you care?” Tony cocked his head to one side, studying Gibbs. “It’s been three months. By now, it should be like I was never there. I mean----“

“Just tell me!” Gibbs didn’t quite snarl, but he came close. He also shifted, clearly wanting to move closer. Tony stepped back, maintaining the distance between them. He wasn’t afraid of Gibbs, but he couldn’t help the instinctive need to be wary in the face of the other man’s anger and agitation.

To his surprise, Gibbs looked almost chagrined by his outburst. The former Marine sighed and Tony could almost see him reining in his temper. When he spoke again there was no anger in his voice. “Tony…I need to know. Will you tell me, please?”
Tony couldn’t remember Gibbs ever saying please or ever actually asking for anything. It was always orders, directives, or commands. Never a request.

Tony forced himself to make eye contact and hold it. He gave the older man a bitter smile. “If I had to sum it up in ten words or less, I’d say I quit because I was tired.”

Gibbs brow furled in confusion. “Tired?”

“Yes, tired.” Tony shot back, suddenly angry. “I know to you that’s probably insufficient, petty, selfish or whatever you’d care to label it. But I’m not going to dress it up into something more just so you won’t think less of me.”

“What?” Gibbs stared at him, mouth open. “Tony…No. That’s not…I don’t understand. What do you mean tired? Explain it to me.”

Tony sighed. Of course Gibbs didn’t get it. How could he?

“Tony…please.”

Again with the please. Maybe the word really was magic. Tony shouldn’t have to explain this, but obviously Gibbs wanted him to, so he found himself telling the other man what he asked.

“I spent four months pretending to be you. Not because I wanted to be you. I did it because that was what the team needed. Someone had to pick up the slack and hold it together, give them a sense that everything would be okay, normal even. And I was the lucky bastard nominated to do the job.”

Tony glared at Gibbs. It wasn’t his fault, Tony knew that, but he felt an irrational desire to blame Gibbs just the same. “They wanted me to be you. And I did my level best to give them what they wanted. Not that it made much difference. It wasn’t good enough because no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t be you.”

Forgetting his earlier wariness, Tony stepped closer, using his height to intimidate, anger radiating from his expression and posture. He was savagely pleased when Gibbs actually moved back. “Any time I tried to do things differently, I was setting myself up for ridicule. ‘Gibbs didn’t do it that way. Gibbs won’t like that. Don’t strain yourself trying to be your own man, DiNozzo, we all know you aren’t Gibbs. Do you have any idea how damn old it got hearing I wasn’t you? Like I didn’t know that!!”

Tony spun away from Gibbs, stalking toward the railing. “So you come back. Hurray. Break out the brass band and the ticker tape. I’m back to playing second fiddle and I was okay with that. Except I got used to being in charge. The transition back to being a peon wasn’t exactly smooth. Of course, my coworkers were oh so helpful with putting me back in my place. Not that you gave a damn.”

Tony gave a derisive snort. It had been pretty damned obvious none of them ever thought he had what it took to be team leader in the first place. Hell, McGee had come right out and said so. Ziva had run to Gibbs at the first sign of trouble. And Abby had her shrine to Gibbs, not to mention giving Ziva the number to call
Gibbs in the first place. And Gibbs…he tried to act like nothing changed, when the truth was everything had. If Gibbs ever ran interference, told his teammates to knock it off and cut Tony some slack, it wasn’t done where Tony could hear it.

Tony shook his head. “They didn’t even notice you weren’t firing on all cylinders when you came back. To them you were the Great Gibbs, back from the dead and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Christ.” The curse didn’t come close to encompassing his level of disgust and disappointment.

Tony grimaced, gripping the railing hard enough to bleach his knuckles white. “Never mind that you lied to them. Abandoned them. Left without a good-bye. Waltzed back in without a ‘hello’, ‘hi how are you’, ‘kiss my ass’, nothing. Just show up like you’d never left. And all was forgiven.”

It must have been nice, Tony mused silently. His mistakes were never brushed off so easily. Nor were they ever forgotten or forgiven so quickly.

Tony turned to face Gibbs again. “I should have left then. Spain wouldn’t have been a bad assignment. Start fresh as the leader of my own team. A team that wouldn’t spend every minute comparing me to you and finding me lacking.”

Tony ran his fingers through his hair. “But I thought they needed me. I thought you needed me. And I was already in play on the La Grenouille case, working as Tony DiNardo. I thought I should stick around and see it through.”

Tony’s lips turned upward in a twisted smile that had little to do with humor. “If I’d known then what I know now, I’d have taken the transfer. Hindsight is a real bitch.”

He sighed heavily. “I was never needed. It was stupid to think so. But then no one ever accused me of being the brightest crayon in the---”

“Tony, you were needed. You are needed.” Gibbs sounded earnest, like he might even mean it. “It’s what I came to—“

“Shut up,” Tony ordered. He didn’t want to hear it. Words meant nothing when actions spoke louder. And the team’s actions had spoken volumes already.

Gibbs gave him a look that at one time would have had Tony babbling an apology, but not any more. Green eyes measured the former Marine, his expression dispassionate. He didn’t work for Gibbs any more. He didn’t have to take or tolerate what Gibbs saw fit to give. And it was high time the other man understood that.

“You asked me for an answer, and an explanation. You can damn well do me the courtesy of keeping your mouth shut and listen to me until I’m finished.” Tony’s chin came up defiantly. “Or you can leave. Choice is yours.”

Gibbs seemed to hesitate, and for a moment, Tony thought the other man was more proud than pissed that he’d stood up to him. But that seemed decidedly unlikely. He also might have looked just a bit hurt that
Tony hadn’t believed him. But again, Tony figured that was just his imagination.

“I’ll get to say my piece when you’re through?” The question was uncharacteristically diffident.

Tony hesitated, then nodded. “Sure.” He smiled slightly as he realized Levon probably wouldn’t let them back in the house if he didn’t at least hear Gibbs out. He said as much.

Gibbs smiled back. “He can be a real pain in the ass.”

“That he can, but he’s a good guy.”

“I’m beginning to see that.”

“Can I finish then?”

“Certainly.”

Tony rubbed tiredly at his eyes. “I was working twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. It was exhausting. Even when you leave out losing two friends along the way.”

He swallowed hard. He tried not to think about Paula Cassidy or John Carson if he could help it. “Did you know I never made it to Paula’s funeral?” He hadn’t made it to John’s either. “I couldn’t take the time off.”

He cast a bleak look at Gibbs, all his sense of loss and sorrow over their deaths showing in his eyes. He took no pleasure in seeing Gibbs wince. Gibbs hadn’t forced him to keep working, but Tony knew it was expected that he’d suck it up and do his job, no matter what. Unlike Gibbs, Shepard had taken time out to actually tell him the job came first. She made it clear too much was riding on him for him to lose focus. Down time to grieve simply wasn’t on the agenda. It hadn’t been when Kate died either.

Tony wasn’t entirely sure he’d have appreciated it if he’d been given time off, but in hindsight he knew he should have taken it. It might have kept him from telling Jeanne he loved her—-and while he had loved her, dearly, telling her so was just one more mistake in a long line of them.

“No.” Gibbs answered his question. “I didn’t know you hadn’t gone to her funeral.”

Tony wasn’t surprised Gibbs hadn’t known he’d missed Paula’s funeral. As far as Tony knew the rest of the team hadn’t gone; if they had, it was never mentioned. They never spoke to him at all about Paula. It was like she never existed.

“Jeanne had some hospital function. I was her date. I tried to slip away. Find an excuse, but DiNardo was a college professor. Not like he had any real reason to——”Tony grimaced, and forced himself to stop babbling. He was making excuses, looking for absolution that couldn’t be given. He was getting off track. He needed to refocus.
“By the time Paula…died…I knew I was in over my head with Jeanne and La Grenouille. I was getting closer to drowning. But there isn’t anyone I can talk to because the only person I have to turn to for help is the same one who shoved me into deep end in the first place.”

Tony kept his voice even. He didn’t want all the anger and remembered disappointment to show. It left a bitter taste in his mouth. It wasn’t like he hadn’t wanted to tell Gibbs. But like a fool he’d let Shepard convince him the operation was need to know. Need to know was apparently her code for ‘this isn’t kosher and I don’t want to get caught’.

“I knew it would end badly. There was really no other way for it to end.” The expression on Jeanne’s face still haunted him. She’d been devastated; finding out both her boyfriend and her father weren’t the men she believed them to be couldn’t have been easy.

“I’d just kept hoping it wouldn’t be quite the disaster it turned out to be.” It was a spectacular mess when it was all said and done. This latest bit with the FBI was just further proof of that.

“Then it’s done. Fucked up but finished. And I thought things would get better. I kept telling myself that it would get easier. I just had to give it some time.”

He shook his head. Thinking about all the ways things hadn’t gotten better was depressing. It wasn’t something he’d really thought much about over the last few months. He had tried to let all the hurt, bitterness and anger fade, choosing to focus on his more positive memories. Talking about it now stirred up things he’d ignored but not really forgotten.

Tony squared his shoulders. “I decided a leave of absence would be a good idea. Thought if I took some time off, I could wrap my head around the fact that my team didn’t trust me and probably never had. I could come to terms with the fact that they didn’t respect me, and likely never would.” Tony ran his fingers through his hair again. “I wanted time to accept the fact that my boss was a hypocrite with a do as I say not as I do attitude.”

Gibbs’ head came up sharply, blue eyes focusing like laser beams. “Wait a min—“

“I’m betting rule twelve was in place before you were in Paris with Shepard. A blind man could tell you slept with her.” Tony curtly cut him off. “You have fifty rules. It’s a safe bet rule twelve wasn’t a last minute add on.”

Tony’s voice was flat and hard. “And it was okay for you not to tell me personal stuff…I could respect you keeping what happened to your wife and daughter to yourself. But there was a whole lot of shit with Franks you didn’t share, and god only knows how many other things you kept to yourself that were case related. You don’t get to make me feel two inches tall for following orders and keeping an undercover operation under wraps when you went out of your way to keep me in the dark for no good reason that I can see. And I sure as hell wasn’t the only one on the team keeping secrets, but no one else got dressed down for it, or handed a shit task that was clearly nothing more than punishment.”

Tony pointed a finger at Gibbs. “It was okay for you to go all lone wolf and not let your team act as back up, more than once I might add. Hell, that crap with Maddie wasn’t exactly new. Meeting Ari alone ring any bells? How about when you helped Fornell fake his suicide and never said a word to me? You’d have
slapped me silly for doing the same thing.”

Tony glared at Gibbs. “If there is another word that would cover telling me not do exactly what you’ve done and are still doing, well feel free to enlighten me because the only one I know is hypocrite.”

Gibbs actually flinched. “It was necessary—“

“Bullshit.” Tony shook his head. “It wasn’t necessary. You choose to leave me out of the loop. And I don’t take it personally because you left everyone out. But you don’t get to preach to me about the right way and the wrong way to do things when you won’t follow your own damn rules.”

Gibbs jaw closed with an audible snap. He looked…Tony wasn’t even sure what to call it. He’d never see the older man look embarrassed or ashamed, but he thought he might just be seeing it now.

“When Shepard refused my request for a leave of absence, I wasn’t willing to take no for an answer. Not from her.” Tony sneered, thinking about that conversation. “Bitch saw nothing wrong with letting me be collateral damage in her own personal war but wouldn’t give me time to get my head on straight. I wasn’t her fucking lapdog.”

“You were my St. Bernard,” Gibbs said quietly.

“I was yes.” Tony agreed. He’d been loyal to a fault, willing to do whatever Gibbs needed whenever he needed it. “Until you left.”

Gibbs looked as though that hurt him to hear. “I couldn’t stay.”

“I know.” Tony tried to smile and then gave up. “I don’t blame you for that. I understand why you left.” It had taken him some time to come to terms with it, but eventually Tony had understood why Gibbs felt the need to leave.

Tony sighed softly. “I don’t understand you not saying good-bye, but I get why you had to go. And I even get why you wanted things to be the same when you came back. But you had to have known the world wasn’t going to stand still, that things changed while you were in Mexico.”

“They didn’t change that much,” Gibbs said, but he didn’t sound at all certain.

“It was enough.” Tony managed to smile this time. “If you use a big enough hammer and a lot of force, you can get a square peg into a round hole, but there will be damage done along the way.”

Gibbs frowned. “I wasn’t trying to be a hammer—“

“No but you were just the same.” Tony nodded. “You turned a blind eye to anything that didn’t fit what you thought it should be. It’s why you didn’t ask more questions about where I went and what I was doing. I know you had to have wondered.”
“I did.”

“But you never asked.”

“Would have told me?”

“Yeah.” Tony shrugged. He would have told Gibbs everything if the man had asked. “I left things out, but I tried not to lie directly, Gibbs.” He couldn’t resist adding a small dig. “Same way you never lied to me.”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed, but he nodded slowly. “Sins of omission.”

“They will still damn you, or so Kate told me.”

“If Shepard had given you the time off would you have come back?”

“I don’t know.” Tony shook his head. “She was the final straw, but it wasn’t just Shepard, Gibbs.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“Did you?” Tony blinked. “You don’t sound sure.”

“Well…I’m beginning to.” Gibbs smiled wanly. “I didn’t realize you thought we didn’t trust or respect you.”

“You thought I should have just said something?” Tony snorted. “Like saying anything wouldn’t have made me look like a whiny asshole wallowing in self-pity.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that.”

“Right.” Tony gave him a hard look. “Because telling me it would be okay if I died as long as I was quiet about it would make your caring, understanding nature so apparent.”

Gibbs flushed. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Damn right you shouldn’t have.” Tony resisted the urge to smack Gibbs one. “I know I went a bit nuts on the Chimera, but I nearly died a dozen times since I started working for NCIS. I had the damn plague, you asshole. Did it occur to you that I might just have found that situation more than a little fucking stressful? That my going a little insane wasn’t because I’m a coward or an idiot, but that I had a damn good reason to think my number might well come up?”

“I never thought you were a coward.”
“No, but I was a moron, right?” Tony snarled. “I had to have been to be there so long and not get the message.”

“Message?”

“After my Mustang blew up, how did I get home?” Tony asked abruptly.

Gibbs stared at him, clearly not following. “I don’t—“

“How did I get to work?”

Gibbs looked at him blankly. He obviously had never given Tony’s mode of transportation a thought.

“Not one person I worked with asked if I needed a lift. No one offered me a ride home or to pick me up.” Tony sneered. “The message, Gibbs, was quite clearly that I didn’t matter and my life didn’t matter as long as the job got done.”

“That’s not true.”

“Kate’s desk sat unmolested for months,” Tony stated coldly. “The guy you thought was me wasn’t even in the ground yet and they were taking my stuff. I’m surprised you weren’t already looking for a replacement.”

Gibbs paled. “DiNozzo, it wasn’t like—“

“Ziva follows me into the men’s room to give me her personal brand of pep talk and advice. It’s a lot like having salt and lemon juice rubbed into an open wound.” Tony wanted to pace but forced himself to stay in one place. “And when I return the favor, give her back what she’s dishing out, the bitch wants me to apologize! Like I didn’t warrant getting the same from her? Where the hell does she get off?”

“Ziva meant well.”

“That’s not the point!” Tony yelled. “And you know it.”

Tony took a deep breath, forcing himself to hold it, trying to stay calm. He glances toward the door, realizing his raised voice had been enough to make Joe and Levon check on him. He wanted to wave them off, but he didn’t think he could convince them he was okay. They didn’t look ready to intervene; there was no harm in letting them stay.

Tony’s tone was level and even when he spoke again. “I saved your life, and it didn’t even warrant a thank you.”

Gibbs swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Tony.”
Tony sighed. He never thought he’d ever get an apology from Gibbs, and now that he had, Tony found himself suspicious of the reason for it. He eyed the other man.

“When I was a kid, and I got in trouble, I was always sorry. Wasn’t really sorry for what I did, I was just sorry I got caught.” Tony cocked his head to one side. “That how you’re sorry?”

The question could almost have been a physical blow from the way it rocked Gibbs back on his heels. Gibbs suddenly looked older and worn down.

“You said the team needs me. What exactly do they need me for?” Tony raised both eyebrows. “You’ve gotten along just fine without me.”

“We have not gotten along fine without you!” Gibbs waved both hands in a frustration gesture that was more Abby’s style than his.

“It’s been three months, Gibbs.” Tony shook his head. “If you really needed me you’ve have found me long before now.”

“We looked for you every day.”

He hadn’t been hiding. They obviously hadn’t looked that hard. Tony couldn’t help asking cynically, “So it’s just a coincidence you found me the same time the FBI is looking for me and starting to investigate the whole team?”

“Yes.” Gibbs’ chin came up in a clear challenge. “And they aren’t investigating the entire team.”

“You always told me there was no such things as coincidence.” Tony shook his head, meeting Gibbs’ challenge with a tight smile. “And he might not have started to look at the team yet, but if Fornell really thinks Shepard was their shooter, he’ll look at everyone on the team involved in the case. Hell, if he had any brains at all he’d look at entire agency since she could have used anyone in it.”

Tony turned to walk away. He’d heard enough. This was all pointless.

“Abby never opened your gift.”

“What?” Tony spun around, shocked. Abby had always torn into presents like a small child on Christmas morning. She always said she loved his gifts. “Why?”

“She didn’t want it to be the last thing she ever got from you. If we couldn’t find you, there might never be another ‘absolutely perfect Tony present’. She has dozens of pictures of you taped to the wall, and an ongoing count of every day you’ve been gone.”

Gibbs stepped closer, his movements almost cautious. “No one has touched your desk. It’s got an inch of dust on it. I didn’t hire anyone else not because you weren’t needed, but because I don’t want anyone else to take your place.”
Blue eyes met green. “McGee checked your phone logs. He’s looked at your bank account every day since you left, searched every computer database and record he could think of. He refuses to use the mug you gave him, but he keeps it on his desk like some kind of talisman.”

Gibbs licked his lips. “Ziva signed up to take an American Cinema class so she could finally understand your movie references and work on her grasp of slang. She broke the nose of a Metro cop who insulted you.”

Gibbs let out a shaky breath. “I never thought to check our personnel file because I thought I already knew what was in it. It was a stupid mistake. I should not have assumed but I did. I forgot about the trust fund you hadn’t touched in years. No one thought to talk to your frat brothers until we got a flier from the alumni organization at Ohio State.”

Gibbs stepped closer. “I dropped the ball. I should have seen how stressful things were. I should not have expected you to take the crap I handed out whether you deserved it or not simply because you always had. I knew how much Paula meant to you. How much you loved your car. How much damage the La Grenouille case did. I ignored what I didn’t want to deal with and I let you down.”

Gibbs reached out to lay a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “That’s what I’m sorry for.”

Tony stared at him, speechless. He had no idea what to say.

“I was already planning to come to Houston when Fornell came to my house. It really is a coincidence that we found you the same time the FBI started looking for you. And I know how unlikely that sounds, but it is the truth.”

Tony wondered if this was what it was like to step though to the other side of the looking glass. Nothing Gibbs said was what he’d expected. Did it change things, Tony asked himself. That they went to such lengths in his absence didn’t negate the fact they had dismissed him when he was there, did it? Had he misread things that badly? If what Gibbs said was true the team had acted far better about his quitting than they had when they thought he’d died. What the hell did that say about him…about them? Tony found he didn’t have an answer.

“Tony?” Gibbs shook him slightly, breaking his reverie. “Are you okay?”

“I really don’t know.” Tony chuckled at the irony. It wasn’t all that long ago he’d been asking himself that same question. “I’ll need to think about it for awhile.”

He looked over his shoulder, calling out softly. “Joe?”

“Yeah, Tony?”

“You mind running with me?” Tony had already gone earlier in the day, and as tired as all this had made him, he needed to move, to find some way to compartmentalize everything into manageable bits and pieces.
All the emotional turmoil needed an outlet or he’d never be able to sleep, and he’d need to get some rest if he was going to face down Fornell. He would go alone if he had to, but he’d rather have Joe go with him. Knowing him as well as they did, neither Joe nor Levon voiced an objection.

“Give me time to change my clothes.” Joe said before turning and heading into the house. Levon stood in the doorway, brown eyes relaying both concern and support.

Tony started to step away from Gibbs, but the older man held on. Tony raised an eyebrow, silently asking Gibbs what he wanted.

“Are we okay?”

“I don’t know that either.” Tony shook his head. “All I know at the moment is that tomorrow I’ll be flying to D.C. to deal with the FBI. Hopefully, at some point, I’ll have a more definitive answer for you.” For me too, Tony added silently.

“Tony—“

“I can’t do any better than that right now, Gibbs.” Tony pulled away. “You’re just going to have to accept it.”

“I was going to say, let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“Oh.” Tony smiled sheepishly. “My bad.”

“It’s okay.” Gibbs smiled. “Not exactly unrealistic to expect me to be a bastard.”

“It’s what the second ‘B’ is for, after all.” Tony nodded, giving Gibbs a quick, understanding grin.

“Yeah, well, I’m trying.”

“That, I do know.”

As Tony headed into the house, he whispered to Levon, “Look after him will you? He’s not a bad guy, just—”

Levon nodded and lightly slapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll see to him. Don’t run too far. Not good for you to push yourself too hard.”

“That’s why I asked Joe to go along. He’ll keep me in line.”

“Good.” Levon smiled at him.
Tony found it reassuring to know that Levon and Joe would have his back. At the moment, they were the one thing he could count on. They never doubted him, and he’d never doubted them. It was nice to have a lodestone.

“Thanks, Cowboy.”

“You’re welcome, Slick.” Levon patted his shoulder again. “Go do what you gotta. I’ll hold down the fort.”
Gibbs woke and stretched, working out the kinks sleeping deeply had created. He sat up and patted the futon he’d slept on. It hadn’t looked terribly comfortable when Lundy offered it to him, but Gibbs didn’t have anywhere else to stay in Houston.

He hadn’t made any reservations, and having followed Lundy to his home Gibbs was honestly uncertain how to navigate his way back through the city in the dark. He could have called Abby or McGee for directions, but was loath to speak to them. They would ask how things had gone with Tony, and Gibbs wasn’t quite sure what to tell them. He’d made some progress but things were far from fixed, and he had no doubt that answer wouldn’t satisfy anyone. It didn’t satisfy him either.

That was why, when it came right down to it, he hadn’t wanted to leave Lundy and LaFiamma’s house. At least while he was in the same location as Tony, he stood a better chance of seeing him again. If he left, Gibbs wasn’t sure he’d get another chance. Tony could easily fly back to D.C., deal with Fornell and leave again, all without ever talking to the team. Gibbs was determined not to let that happen.

Gibbs sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. There was so much he hadn’t noticed or understood that the younger man had brought up last night. Shepard and Ducky had both pointed out some things, but hearing it from Tony was another matter. It was eye opening, and more than just a little painful. Gibbs knew that everyone else on the team, with the exception of Ducky, should hear what Tony had said. They needed to know and understand his reasons for leaving and the role they played in that decision. It wasn’t just Gibbs who needed to apologize.

There was plenty of blame to go around, but Gibbs didn’t find that thought very comforting. Had it been just him, or only Ziva, or simply McGee, Tony probably wouldn’t have left. But Gibbs was beginning to grasp just how hard it had to have been for Tony to feel like his entire team thought so little of him. It was truly amazing that he’d stayed as long as he had.

Gibbs yawned widely, forcing himself to get up. It was harder than usual to get moving because he hadn’t slept soundly in months. He refused to consider that he’d slept so well because he knew Tony was just down the hall in what had been the formal guest room until Tony had moved in.

There were plenty of reasons for his feeling so rested. The futon was more comfortable than it looked. He had been up for more than forty-eight hours. There was a real chance the case was bogus and he had enough to make Fornell squirm. It wasn’t simply because Tony was down the hall, safe and sound, and didn’t hate him---but that was definitely a damn big part of it.

Gibbs smiled ruefully has he got dressed. He hated lying to himself. It was counterproductive.

Gibbs debated trying to put the futon back into a couch position. Fully extended it definitely took up a lot of space in the room that clearly doubled as a home office. But it wasn’t hard to maneuver around, and while Lundy had made it look easy to reconfigure, much the way Abby did with the one in her lab, Gibbs knew first hand it wasn’t as simple as it looked. Gibbs had never been able to figure the damn things out without help, and refused to own one for that reason. He eyed the futon, before shaking his head at it, opting to leave it as it was.

The light was on in the kitchen so Gibbs headed there. He could smell coffee, but found the room empty. A
The light was on in the kitchen so Gibbs headed there. He could smell coffee, but found the room empty. A coffee mug sat on the counter and had obviously been used, but when he touched it, all trace of warmth was gone. Gibbs glanced around, checking the clock on the wall against his watch. It was only five thirty.

So where were Lundy and Lafiamma? More importantly where was Tony? Gibbs had heard voices earlier; he knew at least two of them were up and moving. For one moment he feared they’d left without him before common sense prevailed.

He might not know Lundy all that well, but what he did know told Gibbs he wouldn’t have left without at least saying something. And he definitely wouldn’t have walked away from his home leaving the coffee pot plugged in and lights on.

Gibbs instinctively slipped into a defensive crouch, reaching for his gun when the back door slid open. He relaxed when Lundy walked in. The Texan arched an eyebrow at Gibbs, but didn’t comment on his being so jumpy.

“G’mornin’.” Lundy nodded to Gibbs.

Feeling a little sheepish, Gibbs returned the greeting. “Good morning.”

“Help yourself to the coffee,” Lundy offered. “I just need to grab a quick shower and I’ll get started on breakfast.”

The faint aroma of horse and sweat told Gibbs all he needed to know about what Lundy had been doing outside. The animals he’d seen when he arrived probably didn’t belong to the neighbor as he’d initially surmised. It fit what he knew about Lundy that the man would own a horse or two.

“You okay with waffles?” Lundy asked.

“You don’t have to go to any trouble.” Most days all Gibbs got was coffee. That was good enough.

“Joe and Tony already asked for them. Making a few more won’t be any trouble.”

Gibbs blinked. He’d never known Tony to be a morning person. “Tony’s up?”

Lundy nodded. “He goes running every morning with Joe.”

Gibbs frowned. “But he ran last night.”

Lundy gave him a look that Gibbs recognized as the same one he gave his team whenever they stated the obvious. He successfully fought of a blush.

“Running so much isn’t really good for him,” Lundy commented, almost more to himself than to Gibbs. “But as a coping mechanism, it’s a lot better than hitting the bottle.”
Before Lundy could leave the kitchen, Gibbs grabbed his arm, stopping him. Tony had looked fine, but Lundy just implied that he wasn’t. Gibbs wanted to know why. “What do you mean running isn’t good for him?”

“I said running so much isn’t good for him,” Lundy said, correcting Gibbs. He cocked his head to one side, brown eyes cool. “Having the plague left permanent scars on his lungs.”

Gibbs knew about the scarring. It was how Ducky confirmed the body in the morgue that had been in Tony’s Mustang when it blew up hadn’t been Tony.

“So?”

Lundy gave him a dark look, jerking his arm free of Gibbs’ hold. “That damage reduced his breathing capacity. It affects his strength and stamina. He likes to pretend otherwise and can push himself too hard if someone isn’t there to watch him.”

Gibbs stared at Lundy. “He never said—“

“He shouldn’t have had to say anything,” Lundy snapped at him. “To hear Tony talk, you are supposed to the most observant fucking man on the planet and you never noticed he got winded at times when he shouldn’t, that his reaction time could be slower than it used to be, or that he was tired more often?”

“He passed his fitness exams.” Even to Gibbs that sounded like a poor excuse.

“Of course he did.” Lundy rolled his eyes. “You got agents who smoke a pack a day who can pass that test. Doesn’t mean they are capable of running a damn marathon.”

“I don’t have time to coddle my team, if he had a problem he--.”

“He didn’t need you to coddle him.” Lundy snorted. “Even with his damaged lungs, Tony can still run a mile in less than seven minutes. And he managed to get your sorry ass out of a submerged car and breathe for some teenage girl you nearly got killed along the way. So he was clearly able to do his job.”

Lundy glared at Gibbs. “It would have been nice if you’d at least taken the time out to check on him once in awhile. Make sure he really was okay. To let him know you actually gave a damn and appreciated the risk he was willing to take for you.”

Gibbs jaw clenched at the blunt reminder of the last case Tony had worked. He wanted to shout that Lundy was wrong. He did care about Tony. He always had. He just…wasn’t good at showing it. Given how lame that sounded in his own head, Gibbs wisely refrained from saying it aloud.

“Do me a favor and just stop bringing up shit that makes it hard for me to give you a fair shake.” Lundy grimaced. “I don’t want to regret giving you a chance any more than I already do.”
Gibbs swallowed hard and nodded. He stepped back, holding both hands up, palms out in a gesture of surrender. Lundy left the kitchen and went down the hall.

Gibbs sighed, running a hand through his hair. He really turned a blind eye to a lot of things. Too many things, he thought with another tired sigh, suddenly feeling older than his years.

Gibbs headed for the coffee pot, pulling a mug from the small wooden tree near by. He filled the mug to the brim, sipping the hot beverage carefully. He raised an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised to find the brew as strong as he liked it. The coffee Lundy had provided yesterday at the department had been just as strong and bitter. Gibbs thought maybe it was just a cop thing to prefer coffee that way, but Tony never had. Neither had Ducky, McGee, Ziva, or Kate for that matter.

Shrugging, Gibbs sipped his coffee again. It was their loss.

He’d finished his first cup, watching the sun rise, when Lundy returned. Lundy’s hair was damp, blond curls a bit wilder than they had been. He was wearing a neatly pressed long sleeve button down shirt and blue jeans. Even though he’d only met the man yesterday, Gibbs found himself wondering if Lundy ever wore anything else. Gibbs smiled ruefully to himself. It wasn’t hard to see where the nickname ‘cowboy’ came from.

Gibbs raised his eyebrows as Lundy started to fill another, smaller coffee pot with water. The current pot was still half full. And while he could easily drink a pot by himself, even he didn’t usually start a new pot until after the first one was empty.

“Tony and Joe don’t like their coffee the way I like mine.” Lundy told him, shrugging one shoulder. “Saves on arguments to have a second pot.”

Gibbs could see where it would. He watched as Lundy got out a coffee grinder, pulling a bag of beans from the refrigerator. He knew Tony had liked sweet flavored coffee. Lattes and Espressos were definitely more his thing than Gibbs usual preference for dark and bitter.

With the smaller pot perking, Lundy moved on to making was Gibbs assumed would ultimately become waffles. While he could grill a steak with the best of them, and made a pretty good sandwich, Gibbs wouldn’t profess to any real skill when it came to cooking. Good manners and the habit of a lifetime made it hard for him to watch someone else working while he did nothing.

“Can I help?”

“You can set the table.” Lundy pointed to one of the cabinets.

Gibbs opened it. “Was last night Tony’s turn to do the dishes?”

“No, why?” Lundy looked up from whisking ingredients in a bowl.

“You have real plates.”
“Got fine china too.” Lundy laughed and went back to working on the waffles without explaining any further.

Gibbs frowned and bit his tongue against the desire to demand an explanation. He didn’t mind not understanding technology, but he hated being left out of the joke…especially when it was obvious whatever Lundy found funny was some how at Gibbs’ expense.

He put four plates out on the table, in the same positions as last night. Lundy pointed him in the direction of the silverware and juice glasses. Gibbs found several different types of juice in the fridge. There was cranberry, apple, orange, and grapefruit.

“You don’t like the same kinds of juice either?”

“Would be easier if that was the case, then Joe would stay the hell out of mine.” Lundy chuckled.

“Then why—“

“Just like having some variety is all.”

Gibbs wondered why they didn’t just buy one bottle, finish it and then get something different, until he remembered a brief stay Tony had at his house when the boiler had died at his apartment. The younger man finished off an entire bottle of orange juice in less than two days. If LaFiamma was anything like him, they probably didn’t have any one bottle long enough to have to worry about it going to waste.

“Which one should I put on the table?”

“Pick two.” Lundy shrugged. “It doesn’t matter which ones.”

Gibbs nodded. The orange juice was about half full, the grapefruit was at a similar level, the apple and cranberry looked unopened. Gibbs picked the orange juice and grapefruit. He didn’t particularly care for grapefruit, but then he’d stick with coffee so it didn’t really matter to him.

He heard the front door open, and the sound of voices. LaFiamma and Tony were back. Gibbs forced himself to keep his expression bland. He didn’t want to look anxious or overly concerned. He couldn’t keep himself from scrutinizing Tony though, making sure he was okay after his run. In light of what Lundy had pointed out he’d overlooked or outright ignored, Gibbs felt compelled to pay more attention.

Tony’s Ohio State sweatshirt showed signs of his exertion, and his hair was equally damp with sweat, but he was breathing easily. He looked relaxed and very pleased with himself. Lundy smirked when he saw him.

“You win?”

Tony grinned. “Yep.”
“He cheated,” LaFiamma remarked, lightly punching Tony’s shoulder. He didn’t sound particularly upset.

“Well if he doesn’t, you do, so I guess it works out,” Lundy said with a smile.

LaFiamma gave Lundy a single finger salute. Lundy laughed lightly. “You love me and you know it.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Gibbs blinked in surprise when LaFiamma leaned forward and gave Lundy a kiss…on the mouth. It wasn’t a teasing little buss…no, it was the sort of kiss long time lovers shared. And suddenly Gibbs felt like a complete idiot.

They were both listed as contacts on Tony’s paperwork. They had exhibited signs of being closer than just partners or good friends, far more comfortable in each other’s space than most men would be. They owned a house together. A house that had only three bedrooms; one was Tony’s, one was the home office Gibbs had used, and the other had to be a room they shared. He hadn’t even noticed they’d gone down the hall together last night because he was still thinking about his conversation with Tony. He was more focused on trying to figure out what else he should say, and being relieved he’d been invited to stay close by, than on what Lundy and LaFiamma were doing.

“Wow, I think I heard that penny drop,” Tony said, looking at Gibbs. He looked decidedly amused. In contrast, Lundy and LaFiamma’s expressions were an odd combination of sheepish, defiant and wary.

Gibbs got the impression they’d forgotten he was there or they wouldn’t have kissed each other. It was undoubtedly an action of habit, something they likely did every morning and had forgotten to censure. He glared at Tony, angry at him for being amused by Gibbs being out of the loop and overlooking the obvious.

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Like what?” LaFiamma asked before Tony could respond, turquoise eyes cool, chin rising. “Hey Gibbs, we’ve never met, but we’re as queer as three dollar bills?”

“We aren’t friends, but we want you to know we’re more bent than straight?” Lundy threw out, his tone bitingly sarcastic. “Or maybe you’d prefer it if we had rainbow stickers in the window, or lisped when we talked.”

“Does it really matter, Gibbs?” Tony asked, his head cocked to one side, eyes narrowed as he stared at Gibbs. “Did you suddenly develop homophobia in the last three months?”

“No.” Gibbs snarled. “And that’s not the point.”

“So what is?” Tony asked, openly curious. “If you wouldn’t have treated them any differently knowing they are sleeping together, why does it matter when you found out or how?”
Gibbs almost snapped back that he didn’t like being lied to, but caught himself before he did. They hadn’t actually lied to him. And they were right…they didn’t know him, and they certainly weren’t friends. It wasn’t any of his business if Lundy and LaFiamma were a couple. He was just pissed for not being observant enough to figure it out without something as blatant as the kiss they’d just shared.

“You’re right.” Gibbs took a breath and let it out slowly. He unconsciously straightened his spine, looking at LaFiamma and Lundy. “Your relationship isn’t any of my business. I had no right to act as though you had done something wrong.”

It was as close to an apology as he could bring himself to make. Lundy dipped his head, accepting his words. If he thought Gibbs statement was lacking, it didn’t show. LaFiamma rolled his eyes, but didn’t actually voice any skepticism. It was clear though that Gibbs had lost whatever ground he might have gained with LaFiamma last night.

Ordinarily, Gibbs wouldn’t care that he’d offended someone, or that he wasn’t liked or was even hated, but this was definitely not an ordinary situation. He wasn’t in charge here. He was far from his home turf, off his game, and these sort of verbal missteps were painful reminders he could do without. And these two men were important to Tony, so they were rapidly becoming important to Gibbs by default. If they continued to think he was an ass, bad for Tony, it wouldn’t take much for them to sway Tony to not listen to him or give him another chance to set things to right. Hell without Lundy, he wouldn’t have gotten a chance to talk to Tony at all.

“You really should have paid more attention during those public relations seminars.” Tony said with a wry smile. His next comment immediately lightened the mood in the room. “I think they covered how not to put your foot into your mouth up to your knee.”

Gibbs’ lips curled upward. “Least you aren’t making that point with a golf club.”

“Why ruin a perfectly good club?” Tony laughed softly.

Gibbs shook his head contritely. He’d forgotten just how much Tony knew about him. And he missed having someone other than Ducky know him so well. There were things he never had to explain to Tony, things the younger man just understood and could relate to that McGee and Ziva never would. And Tony didn’t lecture him the way Ducky did, but he wasn’t afraid to point out when Gibbs was being unreasonable or an outright ass.

“So how long have you two been together?”

“Four years.” Lundy smiled warmly at LaFiamma. “Would have gotten together sooner, but he was stubborn about things.”

“Me?” LaFiamma raised an eyebrow. “Thinking that was you, Cowboy.”

“More like both of you.”

“Shaddup, Slick.” Lundy poked Tony in the side, eliciting of all things a giggle. Tony slapped his hand
away, and stepped out of reach.

“Make me,” Tony challenged, green eyes sparkling with mischief.

Lundy smirked. “You want waffles or not?”

“Shutting up now.”

“Go get cleaned up.” Lundy laughed. “It’ll be ready when you get back.”

“Perfect.” Tony was already moving, heading toward his room.

LaFiamma gave Gibbs a challenging look before kissing Lundy’s cheek and then whispered something that made Lundy smile and then blush. Gibbs sipped his coffee and looked away. He wasn’t going to let LaFiamma needle him that easily. Their being a couple really didn’t bother him. Although, he was decidedly curious as to how they managed to make it work. His own short lived romance with Shepard was a prime example of just how ugly things between colleagues could get.

In a moment of honest reflection, Gibbs had to admit he and Jenny were not really be a good example. Their relationship had been a byproduct more of the needs of the situation than genuine attraction and interest. Oh she was his type, as far as being a beautiful, strong-willed redhead capable of holding her own. But when came right down to it, she was just as determined to have her own way as Gibbs was, and no relationship could survive when neither one would bend. Not to mention she was ambitious. Shepard would never have settled for being Mrs. Gibbs when her career could potentially make her so much more than that.

Gibbs stifled a sigh. Shannon was the only one who’d seen him as the prize and not something she’d settled for. She hadn’t tried to change him into something he wasn’t. She’d loved the life they had together, and their daughter. It was enough for her.

Gibbs looked away from Lundy and LaFiamma, stifling the envy which spiked at thinking they had the sort of relationship he’d lost. Three failed marriages were testimony to the likelihood of his having it again. He suddenly wished he had something stronger to put in his coffee or maybe he should have given into the urge to stay in bed longer and avoided all this entirely.

“You okay?”

The question brought Gibbs back to himself. He glanced around and realized it was once more just him and Lundy in the kitchen.

“I’m fine.”

“You might want to inform your face then, because you don’t look it.”

Gibbs clenched his jaw against snarling at Lundy to just leave him the hell alone. It wasn’t his fault that the
loss of his wife and daughter still hurt. And he was a guest in the man’s home. He did have some manners, although his recent behavior might have called that statement into question.

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

“Okay. If you say so.” Lundy started making waffles without further comment.

Gibbs couldn’t decide which bother him more…that Lundy would accept his statement or that he clearly didn’t believe him but opted not to challenge him on it. Gibbs rubbed a hand over his face. He hadn’t been up for an hour and he was already tired.

“You want to fly with back with us?” Lundy asked, surprising Gibbs again. He hadn’t expected an invitation. Hoped for one, thought about how to demand a seat on the Gulfstream, but hadn’t actually planned on being asked.

“You don’t mind?”

Lundy shrugged. “There’s room.”

Gibbs grimaced. “That’s doesn’t exactly answer my question.”

Brown eyes met blue. “Tony and Joe talked about it when they went running last night. Joe and I talked about it before we went to bed. Tony wanted to ask you, but wanted to make sure we were okay with it before he did. I told him I’d ask you, if you were up before they got back.”

“Tony wants me to go with you?”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t he ask me?” Gibbs couldn’t help being a bit suspicious.

“Because if you were going to be an ass about it, I figured it would be better if you were an ass to me or Joe.” Lundy’s tone was very matter-of-fact. “And Joe is too apt to belt you one, so it was definitely best for it to be me that did the asking. Less chance of blood shed that way.”

“Why would I—“

“Hell, I don’t know, Gibbs.” Lundy gave him a sardonic look. “It’s not like you’ve been all that predictable since you got here, and I haven’t known you long enough to say if that’s normal for you or not. So you’ll have to forgive me for not being sure exactly which way you’re going to jump.”

Gibbs had to admit the man had a point. He smiled. “Better safe than sorry, that it?”
“Yep.”

“If I am still welcome, I’d like to fly to D.C. with you.”

“If you weren’t still welcome, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Even though I was an ass about—“

“Even though you were an ass about finding out about me and Joe.” Lundy snickered. “And as being an ass goes, that was minor.”

Gibbs shook his head. And Lundy thought he was hard to get a handle on. He still couldn’t figure the blond out.

“While you’re on the plane, you should talk to Tony. Clear the air a little more.”

Gibbs nearly gaped at Lundy. He really didn’t get the man at all, but he was pretty sure he owed the man one, maybe even more than that. “I’m going to owe you big, aren’t I?”

Lundy smiled innocently at him. “Don’t worry, you’ll be in good company.”
Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Gibbs wasn’t surprised to find that there was a specially designated area at the Houston airport for private planes, complete with multiple hangers and several runways. It was almost the norm at larger airports. It kept the smaller jets out of the way of larger commercial passenger planes, and it gave the air of exclusivity that those rich enough to afford the luxury of having their own planes expected.

Lundy parked his truck in a small lot that was next to hanger bay 7. He got out of the truck, and motioned for everyone else to follow suit. He raised two fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle. A moment later, a small inset door in the side of the hanger opened and a dark haired young man who didn’t look old enough to drive to Gibbs stepped out. He smiled brightly when he saw Lundy.

“Levon! Good to see you man.” The kid moved with a noticeable bounce in his step. He reminded Gibbs of an eager puppy.

“Good to see you to JD.” Lundy shook hands with the kid. “You pilot or copilot today?”

Gibbs frowned. This…teenager…was a pilot? Gibbs studied him closer. Maybe it was just the fact that he was wearing jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers that made him look so young. He had to be older than he looked to get a license. At least Gibbs hoped so.

“Pilot.” JD laughed. “Buck lost the coin toss.”

Lundy arched an eyebrow. “You didn’t use Ezra’s two headed coin did you?”

JD grinned brightly. “ Might have.”

Lundy snickered. “Better hope he doesn’t find out.”

“He won’t.”

Lundy ruffled JD’s hair. “Good boy.”

JD batted his hand away. “You’re as bad as Buck.”

“Doubt that.” Lundy laughed. “He got the plane ready?”

“Just finished the preflight check.” JD nodded. He pointed to the truck. “You need help with your luggage?”

“Nah.” Lundy shook his head. “Even Joe didn’t pack that much.”

LaFiamma rolled his eyes. “Just because I don’t want to look like a bum doesn’t make me some kind of prima donna, Cowboy.”
Given that the man was currently wearing a suit that likely cost more than Gibbs made in a month, he had some doubts about the other man’s statement. No one spent that sort of money on a suit if his appearance wasn’t decidedly important to him. The black suit, with a dark blue silk shirt and a lighter blue tie with a pattern of small black diamonds made LaFiamma look more like a male model, a high priced attorney or a businessman than he did a cop.

Tony was similarly well attired. His suit was a dove gray, with a light green silk shirt and a slightly dark green tie. It was the sort of look that would have had Abby giving him an appreciative once over and commenting that every penny Tony had spent on his designer clothes was well spent. Gibbs would have felt underdressed if it weren’t for the fact that Lundy was in jeans.

“As you probably guessed, the fancy looking feller with the dark hair is my partner Joe LaFiamma. Joe, this is JD Dunne.”

“Nice to meet you, JD.” LaFiamma held out his hand.

“Same here.” JD shook LaFiamma’s hand, smiling. “Heard a lot about you.”

“All good, I hope.”

JD’s smile got brighter. “Mostly.”

LaFiamma pointed a finger at Lundy. “You told him the truth, didn’t you?”

Lundy shrugged. “Nothing but gospel, boy.”

“Asshole,” LaFiamma muttered but he was smiling.

“That other fancy dressed dude is Tony DiNozzo. Tony, JD.”

“Pleasure,” Tony held out his hand.

JD shook it. “Any friend of Lundy’s is a friend of mine.”

“He’s family, JD.”

The correction was soft, but it was clear it meant something to JD by the way he gave Tony a second once over. He nodded. “Definitely nice to meet you then.”

Tony seemed to be taken momentarily off his stride by JD’s reaction, but recovered quickly. “You know stories about Levon?”
“I got a couple of duzzies I could share.”

“Sweet.” Tony raised a fist, and JD bumped it with his. “We need to talk.”

“Shame Ez is busy.” JD smirked. “He’s the one with lots of stories.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Lundy said. “The last of our group is Jethro Gibbs. Gibbs, JD Dunne. Don’t let his baby face fool you, the kid is older than he looks.”

JD stuck out his tongue at Lundy before offering his hand to Gibbs. “Nice to meet you, Sir.”

Gibbs nodded, shaking JD’s hand, successfully reining in the urge to tell him not to call him ‘sir’. He wasn’t sure why the kid called him ‘sir’. There wasn’t any thing in Lundy’s introduction that marked him as an outsider in the group. Maybe it was just his being older than everyone else.

“You don’t need to sir him, JD.” Lundy said, shouldering his backpack. “It makes him tetchy.”

JD raised both eyebrows. “Same way it does, Chris?”

“Pretty much.”

JD grinned. “Might not want to say anything to Buck then.”

“Why?” Gibbs asked.

“Because if it bothers you, Buck will just keep doing it.” JD shrugged. “He claims it’s part of his charm.”

“Well, he is one of them most charming pricks I know,” Lundy offered dryly, rolling his eyes. He started walking around the hanger. Tony moved to follow, a garment bag carelessly slung over one shoulder. Gibbs wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or a bad one that one bag, with suits, was all Tony seemed to be bringing.

“You have some of the strangest people as friends, Levon.” LaFiamma pulled a small carryon case behind him, walking in step with his partner.

“Oh like you can talk.” Lundy snorted. “I’ve met some of your friends.”

“Please. None of my—“

“Manny.”

Joe frowned. “Okay, so maybe he is a little—”
“Sally.”

“Hey, she’s not even what I’d really call a friend. That was just…”

Gibbs stopped listening, looking toward Tony. “Are they always like this?”

“Most of the time, yeah.” Tony chuckled.

As they rounded the hanger, the plane was readily visible on the tarmac. The white finish, gleaming brightly in the sun, was broken only by a black ace of spades painted across the tail section. Tony whistled in silent appreciation. JD gave him a delighted grin.

“Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Very.”

“If you guys want to just go ahead and board, I’ve got to finish up a few things here, and we’ll be ready to take off.”

“Sure thing, JD.” Lundy gave him a two finger salute, getting a wink and a similar salute in return.

“Hey, Levon?” Tony called out as he followed the blond up the steps into the plane.

“Yeah?”

“What does your friend Ezra do?”

“As little as possible, Slick.” Lundy laughed, tossing his bag into an overhead compartment and flopping down on one of the leather seats.

Tony gave him a dirty look as he neatly hung his garment bag in the closet provided for that purpose. Kate might have accused Tony of being a pig, but when it came to taking care of his possession, he was far more particular than she’d given him credit for.

“Seriously, Levon, what does he do?”

“Ezra handles financial investments.” Lundy shrugged. “He tried to explain it to me once, but all I can honestly say is I ever really understood was that’s a lot like playing poker.”

After putting his bag in the same compartment Lundy had used, LaFiamma sat next to his partner. Tony took a seat opposite Lundy. Gibbs sat next to Tony. He expected to get some sort of warning glance from LaFiamma, and the other man didn’t disappoint him. It was clear LaFiamma still didn’t trust him. Lundy, on
the other hand, didn’t even bat an eye.

Conversation drifted between Lundy, LaFiamma and Tony covering topics from details on their cases, to their coworkers and friends, to movies they’d seen or would like to see, renovation plans for the house, and sports. Gibbs was under no obligation to participate, but they didn’t make any effort to exclude him either. Watching and listening to them Gibbs was painfully aware of how this sort of lighthearted banter and general life related discussions had been absent from his team since Tony left. If they still talked and teased each other, it wasn’t where Gibbs could overhear it.

Twenty minutes after they were airborne, Tony became restless. He pulled out the flash drive Lundy had given him, playing with it. Gibbs knew Tony had already reviewed the information on it, but he could understand Tony wanting to go over it again. He knew first hand that it was best to be prepared when going up against Fornell.

Lundy watched Tony fiddle with the flash drive. He pointed to what Gibbs could only think of as the ‘office area’ of the cabin. It had a desk, at any rate, and a plush looking office chair.

“Unless he’s suddenly changed his habits, Ezra usually keeps a spare laptop in the desk drawer.”

“He leaves a spare laptop on his plane?” Tony looked surprised.

“Guy makes his living keeping up with the markets worldwide. He says he can’t afford not to be able to connect any time, anywhere.” Lundy shrugged. “He’s got a back up to his Blackberry and cellphone too.”

“He have technical difficulties a lot?” Joe asked.

“Dunno about a lot, but he did at least once. Cost him a pretty penny too.” Lundy shrugged again. “When I asked about it, he said he didn’t want to ever again be at the mercy of some times frail and unstable nature of the devices upon which his livelihood depends.”

Gibbs thought this Ezra must be a smart guy. He’d never be able to do half the things McGee did, whether the damn computer was working or not. Tony had been the least adept of the team and even he did better than Gibbs ever managed to do when it came to making a computer behave.

“He won’t mind if I use his computer?”

“Man didn’t baulk at letting us use his plane. Doubt using his computer will faze him much. Especially since anything sensitive will be protected.”

Tony nodded and got up. He headed for the desk, settling into the plush leather seat with a satisfied sigh. The laptop was where Lundy said it would be, and with no trouble at all Tony had it plugged in and booted up.

Gibbs watched him study the case file. He couldn’t tell by the younger man’s expression just what details he was reviewing. He itched to talk to him, to have the sort of one on one discussion he had with him when
Tony had first started working at NCIS. And it would definitely be a safer topic of conversation than
rehashing why Tony quit and if he would consider coming back to NCIS. Gibbs wasn’t sure he was ready
to ford that breech again yet or not. He kept hoping Tony would make the first move.

Lundy nudged Gibbs with the toe of his boot. “You waiting for an engraved invite?”

Gibbs glared at him. Lundy just stared calmly back at him, unruffled. It was decidedly annoying.

With a silent sigh, Gibbs undid his seatbelt and got up. As he headed toward Tony, he was aware that
LaFiamma switched seats. There was no doubt in his mind LaFiamma did so in order to keep an eye on
Gibbs. Part of him wanted to be pissed by the clear display of distrust, and another part of him still found it
reassuring that Tony had someone watching his six. Gibbs shook his head. He hated ambiguity.

Gibbs sat down in the seat facing the desk. Tony glanced up, making eye contact. He didn’t seem overly
surprised or wary. If Gibbs didn’t know better he’d have thought Tony and Lundy had planned this.

“Do you think she did it?” Tony asked quietly.

Gibbs pursed his lips, considering the question not needing Tony to expound further on who or what. He
sighed. “Probably.”

“Me too.” Tony nodded. Green eyes flickered away before meeting blue again. “Proving me innocent
doesn’t require we prove her guilty.”

Gibbs raised both eyebrows. “You want her to get away with murder?”

“Hell no.” Tony grimaced, shaking his head. He rested his elbows on the desk, leaning forward slightly.
“But have you thought about what happens if Shepard is convicted?”

“She goes to jail.”

Tony snorted. “And the collateral damage…you think about that?”

Gibbs brow furrowed. “Collateral damage?”

“I realize politics isn’t your strong suit.” Tony cocked his head to one side. “But you can’t honestly believe
there wouldn’t be a hurricane size shit storm that comes out this. Seriously, Gibbs, how could it not?
Convicting the director of a federal agency of running an unsanctioned investigation of a foreign national
and murdering the man is going to have an impact on more than just Shepard.”

Gibbs frowned. He hadn’t honestly thought about it.

“She misused government equipment and personnel, Gibbs. That alone will guarantee someone on Capital
Hill will want to take a closer look at just what is going on in a small agency they never heard of.” Tony
made a small moue of distaste as though he’d bitten into something sour. “An oversight committee going over every penny spent, every shot fired, every case worked…my won’t that be fun.”

Tony shook his head. “And I can think of at least a dozen cases we worked where the rules got bent. They take a closer look at how things were done…even if we never officially stated it in the reports they are bound to find out about locks that got picked, computers that got hacked into, mail that was taken without a warrant, suspects that were lied to or never formally read their rights, lack of cooperation with other agencies….trust me, something will come up that will bite you in the ass.”

Tony sighed and raised a hand to rub tiredly at his eyes. Gibbs wondered just how much sleep he’d gotten the night before. He had a feeling Tony’s wasn’t nearly as restful as his own had been and he suddenly felt guilty for having gotten a good night’s sleep.

Tony looked at him, expression sober. “If what we suspect is true, Shepard is chest deep in shit and she’s at the top of the hill. Given how shit flows, just how deep do you think it will be when it gets to where you are? Where McGee, Ziva and Abby are? Ducky and Palmer?”

“What about you?” Gibbs asked, noticing Tony had left himself off the list.

“I already got a lifeboat.” Tony nodded to where Lund and LaFiamma sat. “An oversight committee can’t fire me or force me to resign. They can’t reassign me to a crap detail for punishment. They can’t dock my pay, watch my every move or double check my work. At best they can call me back to question my actions, but I always have the Nuremburg defense to fall back on. I just followed orders like a good little soldier should.”

Gibbs considered what Tony said. He was right. If one of the higher ups decided to put NCIS under a microscope since Shepard took over, things could get ugly. And it wasn’t even just her…no, Tony was right about that too. Many of the cases they’d work rules had been bent. Gibbs had outright broken several. He’d gotten away with doing so because he’d been right, and the end result had been worth it, but an outsider looking in might see him as tainted by the same ‘corruption’ as Shepard. The worst thing was Gibbs wasn’t entirely sure they’d be wrong. Tony’s point about him being a hypocrite had been an unexpectedly accurate and decidedly painful hit. His recommitting himself to the principles that had guided him for most of his life might have come too late.

“Damn.”

“Exactly.” Tony looked at him steadily. “So my question to you is how do you want to play this?”

“You think we should let her walk?” Gibbs made a point of trying to include Tony in the decision.

“There is no ‘we’, Gibbs.” Tony bit his lower lip, sitting back. “My goal is to prove my own innocence. Whether Rene Benoit was murdered or committed suicide is not my problem.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t care.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t care, Gibbs.” Tony met his gaze squarely. “I said it’s not my problem.” Tony’s lips
curled upward in a bitter smile. “I’m not even a federal agent any more, Gibbs.”

“That can be fixed.”

“How?” Tony snorted. “You think now would be a good idea to have Shepard reinstate me?” His tone was laced with biting sarcasm.

“Tony—“

“She might be the target of an FBI investigation and could easily be fired for misconduct and abuse of her office if nothing else.” Tony rolled his eyes. “And let’s not forget the bitch already used me like a cheap whore. So, no, I don’t even want to consider what asking her for a favor might cost me. Thanks anyway.”

“I didn’t mean her—“

“It doesn’t matter, Gibbs.” Tony shook his head. “I’m not coming back to NCIS.”

Gibbs paled hearing that stated so bluntly. He thought that last night he’d made some headway toward fixing things. Tony hadn’t seemed quite so lost as when he’d left to go running last night, and he seemed okay at breakfast. There was no anger or veiled hostility, no resentment or disappointment either. He acted the way he had for as long as Gibbs had known him.

Gibbs took a deep breath and released it. “You know I said the same thing.”

“I know.”

“I changed my mind.”

“I know that too.” Tony smiled. “But you went to Mexico and didn’t have any firm obligations there. Me…I went to Houston where I have family, friends and a job. Not the same Gibbs.”

“Everyone wants you back.”

“Maybe.” Tony looked away.

“There’s no maybe about it, DiNozzo.” Gibbs wanted to shake him. Was it really that hard to believe the rest of the team missed him? “Didn’t what I said last night tell you anything?”

Tony’s expression was unreadable. “If I said yes to coming back, what happens then?”

“What do you mean what happens?”

“Everything back to normal, right?” Tony arched an eyebrow.
His first reaction was to say ‘yes’, but Gibbs hesitated to speak. He felt like he did when any of his ex-wives always put him on the spot. Whatever he said would likely be the wrong thing.

“I don’t want things back the way they were. The way things were is the reason I left.”

“Things changed when I was gone,” Gibbs reminded him. He might not have wanted to see it, tried to actively ignore it, but as Tony pointed out last night, things had changed.

“Yeah, and I was one of them.”

Gibbs’ jaw tightened. “It will be better,” he insisted quietly, sounding more confident than he truly felt.

Tony shook his head. “You can’t step in the same river twice. And I don’t think I really want to.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

Tony sighed. “I’m not going to give up what I have in Houston on the chance things in D.C. will have improved in my absence. Or hope that old habits won’t be resurrected.”

Gibbs tried to smile. “I thought you were a risk taker.”

“I was.” Tony looked sad. “Then Kate died. And John. And Paula.” Tony’s gaze shifted to the window. “I nearly died more times than I care to count. The only woman I ever said ‘I love you’ to and actually meant it is trying to frame me for murder.”

Tony cleared his throat. “I can’t risk more any more than I can stand to lose, and right now, Gibbs, I don’t have anything to put on the table.”

Everyone had a breaking point, Gibbs knew that. He’d found his own when the Cape Fear exploded and nineteen men died needlessly. He couldn’t tell Tony to just suck it up any more than he could promise the reasons he left NCIS in the first place wouldn’t resurface.

Gibbs swallowed hard. “What about the others?”

“If they want to talk to me, I’ll listen.” Tony stated firmly. “I owe them that much. But I’m not making any promises.”

Gibbs nodded. Abby and Ducky might stand a chance of changing Tony’s mind and convincing him coming back to NCIS wasn’t as big a risk as he seemed to think. McGee and Ziva, Gibbs wasn’t so sure about. The one person he needed to make certain didn’t say anything to Tony was Shepard. She’d already tipped the balance once, he had no illusions that she could fuck things up again.
“You want some coffee?” Tony asked.

“I’d love a cup.”

“While I make a pot, how about you go through that again,” Tony pointed to the computer. “Maybe we can find a way to keep everyone else at NCIS from being tainted by Shepard’s little vendetta and still see to it she doesn’t get away with murder.”

Gibbs nodded. He still had people to protect. And maybe this would give him another angle to work with Tony. He wasn’t ready to throw in the towel yet.
Tony sighed silently, his grip on the door handle tightening as Gibbs swerved around a semi with little room to spare. Gibbs’ driving hadn’t improved in the three months he’d been gone. Although, Tony could honestly say traffic in D.C. had nothing on Houston. He wasn’t sure if drivers in that city even knew there were rules of the road. At least in D.C. it was usually only Gibbs who drove like maniac.

He glanced over his shoulder, trading a look with Joe. Joe smiled back, looking completely at ease. If Gibbs thought his driving would unnerve Joe or Levon, he was mistaken. Tony didn’t think even Ziva’s driving would faze them much.

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Gibbs had called the team shortly before they’d landed. So everyone knew he was back, and Tony fully expected them to be at the Naval Yard waiting. He wasn’t sure if he’d be disappointed or relieved if he was wrong and they weren’t there.

Tony had no idea what to say to any of them. An apology for how he left would likely be a good starting point, except apologizing might make it seem as though he was sorry he’d quit or that he’d done something wrong. Neither was true.

Tony grimaced. Gibbs never apologized and no one expected him to. It didn’t seem fair that he should have to. But as Tony considered how Gibbs had left, the way he returned, and how he felt about his own treatment, it became less a reason to follow suit and more a reason not to. Tony wasn’t Gibbs; he didn’t have to use him as his benchmark any more or act like him.

The truth was he wished he had handled leaving better, and there was no harm in admitting it to his former teammates. His old team had never believed him to be infallible; admitting an awareness of his own limitations and shortcomings wasn’t going to shock them. He really had nothing to lose by being honest.

Levon’s words to him from several months ago came back to him—‘knowing when to say enough is enough isn’t a sign of weakness, it’s just good sense’. Tony didn’t know if McGee, Ziva and Abby would see it that way, but he was confident Ducky would. It wasn’t his fault if they couldn’t handle the truth or appreciate just how much crap he’d tolerated before reaching his breaking point.

Tony hoped that he could tell them enough they would understand, if not agree with, his choice. If they really had gone to the level of effort Gibbs said they did, he owed it to them to let them know as abrupt as his decision to leave appeared to be it wasn’t without some thought. He hadn’t left out of self-pity or selfishness. He hadn’t left out of spite. It wasn’t any one person’s fault but a culmination of a lot of things.

Hell, if I had to, I could always blame it on post traumatic stress, Tony thought. It wasn’t like that excuse would be too far from the truth. He’s certainly had his share of stress, but he didn’t want to blame his decision to leave on an illness he didn’t really have. The truth would simply have to do.

Tony thought it would be best if he didn’t apologize or explain his actions to his former teammates en masse. It was definitely something best done with each individually. That meant telling them probably wouldn’t be done immediately because if they were at the Naval Yard, they’d all be there…together. He’d just have to arrange some time alone with each of them. He didn’t think it would be hard because he was fairly certain Gibbs was hoping they’d corner him, one on one, to try and change his mind about coming back to NCIS.
Tony might not have convinced Gibbs he was sure about not returning to NCIS while on the plane, but the more he thought about it the more confident he became that he’d made the right decision. Even if his old team promised, as Gibbs had, that things would be different, Tony wasn’t sure he had enough faith to risk it. Their lack of respect, trust and concern weren’t acts of deliberate malice. They weren’t premeditated with the goal of hurting his feelings…so how could they promise it wouldn’t happen again?

Tony didn’t genuinely believe they could or would change enough to match what he had found with his coworkers in Houston. Even as a newbie, he felt more at home in Houston. He was more comfortable with his coworkers there in three months than he had been in three years at NCIS. In Houston, he was an asset to the team from the beginning, not just someone Gibbs had picked and no one else had faith in. His experience and credentials counted for something there. They didn’t question his ability or his skills.

In Houston, the team did things together. They were more than just coworkers…they were friends. There were dinners, drinks, movies, and basketball games. Hell, they even had a hang out. When Tony started work, before the others knew he was staying with Joe and Levon, half the squad had offered him a place to stay. When the boiler had gone out in his place in DC, none of his coworkers initially even considered letting him so much as sleep on their couch for a night.

It was possible his level of comfort with the Major Case Squad was really a byproduct of the fact that his new team had been together far longer than any team Gibbs had ever was. The only one on Gibbs’ team with any staying power, other than the man himself, was Tony. Everyone else was always new, always changing. In contrast, the core of the Major Case Squad had been together for years. Levon, Joe, and Carol had been on the squad for more than five years. Esteban had been part of the team for over three years. Only Roberto and Tony had less than a year in.

Periodically there were a few newbies who were rotated through for the benefit of the experience of working with Beaumont’s team. The core group saw it as their duty to take care of the new people, to look out for them and make sure they not only learned something but enjoyed the process of doing so. Overall, it made for a different dynamic; one that was more like the TV families Tony had been fascinated with as a child.

Tony glanced around the Naval Yard as Gibbs whipped into the parking lot without slowing down. Nothing had changed that he could see, and he hadn’t really expected it to. Tony sighed softly, a sense of dread welling up in him. Even if he had been looking forward to seeing his old teammates, this wasn’t a social call. Fornell was waiting inside to talk to him. The man might be hoping to use him to flush out Shepard, or he might genuinely want to see Tony convicted of murder. Either way, it wasn’t going to be any fun.

Not to mention Jeanne. Tony had no idea where she might be, and if he’d have to face her…or if he even wanted to. Part of him wanted the chance to explain, to ask her forgiveness. Another part wanted to smack her for daring to try and pin her father’s death on him.

Gibbs parked the car, tires screeching in protest at the abrupt stop. Tony resisted the urge to curse as the seatbelt drew him up short, holding him tightly to the seat. He’d forgotten how much he hated that.

“I’m guessing you don’t buy tires for this car,” Levon drawled laconically from the back seat. As usual, Gibbs ignored any comments on his driving.
Joe lightly slapped Levon’s arm. “Now you know where your tax dollars go.”

“I want my money back. Let him waste some other bastard’s dime.” Levon got out of the car, not bothered by Gibbs’ silence as he responded to his partner’s teasing. He stretched. Several vertebrae popped, announcing their presence loudly.

Joe gave him a dark look. “I hate it when you do that.”

“I know.” Levon smiled.

Tony couldn’t help but grin. He knew annoying Joe wasn’t the reason Levon made his joints pop. Having it annoy Joe was simply a bonus.

Gibbs started to walk away from the car, clearly expecting them to follow. Joe and Levon made no move to do so. Tony watched them, spotting the usual ‘weapons check’ movements. It could simply be them communicating with a few pointed looks, gauging their respective readiness to a full out cleaning of their weapons. Joe and Levon never entered into any situation either considered dangerous without pausing for a moment to check their readiness and make sure anything they might need to use was good to go. Today, it was a few looks and hands moving to ensure weapons were settled properly.

Even though he wasn’t expecting to use them, Tony checked his own weapons. His shoulder holster, neatly concealed beneath his well tailored jacket, was properly settled and ready. His backup ankle piece was where it should be. His belt knife was secure and ready if he needed it; Levon had sharpened it for him just last week. Tony smoothed out his expression, making sure he looked calm and unconcerned. His game face was as much a part of his arsenal as his guns and knife.

Joe shot him a questioning look. Tony nodded, answering that silent inquiry. He was okay and he was ready.

Gibbs turned back, his expression a blend of impatience and curiosity. Levon smiled at him, and then raised two fingers to the brim of his Stetson in his usual salute. It was a signal the entire team had adopted and used for a variety of occasions. They used it to greet each other, to say goodbye, show agreement, indicate approval and signify readiness. The salute certainly didn’t explain why they stopped, or why they were now moving to follow, and the trace of confusion in Gibbs’ face reflected he didn’t completely understand. Tony took perverse pleasure in knowing that in this small way Gibbs was out of the loop.

Going through security was interesting. The guard on duty was new. It was momentarily disconcerting for Tony to be confronted by the first true indication that things had changed since he’d left. He sighed silently. There would be no just walking through. He shouldn’t really be disappointed. He’d only gotten to do that when Mike was on duty and it was two in the morning.

Tony ducked his head, hiding a smile when the guard’s flabbergasted expression when Joe proceeded to unload his weaponry. Gibbs arched an eyebrow at the number of lethal objects Joe had managed to hide about his person.

“He always pack that much heat?”
Tony shrugged. “Sometimes he carries more.”

“Why?”

“Not my story to tell.” Tony shook his head. If Gibbs really wanted to know, he’d have to ask Joe himself. Joe trusted him with his secrets; Tony wouldn’t betray the trust his cousin put in him by speaking out of turn.

Joe shot the guard a dirty look as he set about returning all his weapons to their previous places. Levon just nodded to the guard, no rancor in his demeanor despite being forced to remove his belt in addition to his weapons because the buckle set off the metal detector. Tony knew he understood the guy was just doing his job.

Finally free to enter the building, they stepped into the elevator. Tony took a deep breath and released it slowly, watching his reflection in the high polish of the elevator doors. He tried on a smile for size and wasn’t surprised the mask it no longer fit. He hadn’t had to smile when he didn’t feel like doing so since he’d left. No one in Houston ever wanted or needed him to be anything other than genuine. Joe put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing once.

The doors opened. Tony eyed the familiar floor, noting again how little had changed. He almost wished the walls had been repainted or the furniture rearranged. Maybe then it wouldn’t feel so odd to be where things looked familiar but no longer felt the way they once had. He was reminded of his last visit to his father’s house just before going to college. Nothing had changed and yet nothing was the same.

Tony let Gibbs exit first. Doing so was as much the byproduct of an old habit as it was his unease with the thought of having to face his former teammates. The hesitation was minute, and likely wouldn’t have been noticed by anyone who didn’t know him well. The light pat on his shoulder from Levon, a gesture of support and encouragement, had been exactly what he needed.

Tony followed Gibbs to the team’s work area. Joe and Levon flanked him on either side, half a step behind.

“Tony!!”

Abby’s cry of his name wasn’t entirely unexpected, nor was her running forward to hug him hard enough to steal the breath from his lungs. He was able to make a ‘stand down’ gesture to Joe and Levon when he saw them reaching for their guns. He’d told them about Abby, and they’d seen pictures of her, Levon had even ‘met’ her via their link up when reviewing the case, but it was hard not to see her flying, full body tackle type hug as a non-threatening action when witnessing it for the first time.

Tony hugged her back, basking for a moment in her display of affection. He rested his cheek on her head, eyes closing as he breathed in the scent of her shampoo and gunpowder perfume. It didn’t matter that she’d ignored him, dismissed his ability to do the job, failed to even ask about his health, or hurt his feelings. He’d missed her.

Tony reluctantly began the difficult process of extricating himself from Abby’s hug. It had never been easy to get her to let go before she was ready and this time was no different. What was different though was that
she didn’t immediately begin speaking when they were finally arms length apart. She just stared at him with overly bright eyes and an uncertain smile.

Not wanting sure what to make of Abby’s behavior, Tony looked away. He nodded to McGee. “Hello, Prob—” Tony stopped abruptly, cutting off the nickname McGee had always objected to. McGee wasn’t his probationary agent any more and Tony wasn’t even an agent now. He had no right to call him ‘Probie’.

“McGee. Good to see you.”

Tony wasn’t quite sure what to make of the flash of disappointment he saw in McGee’s eyes. Maybe he’d actually wanted to be called ‘Probie’. Tony internally rolled his eyes at himself. It was for more likely the other man wasn’t as happy to see him as Abby seemed to be a moment ago. But McGee smiled at him, and it was genuine.

“Good to see you too, Tony.”

Tony shifted is gaze to Ziva. The Israeli was just as lovely as he remembered her being. And just as hard to read. Her expression gave nothing away.

“Hello, Ziva.”

“Tony.” She nodded to him. Her eyes roved over him with an intensity that made Tony think backing up would be a good idea. He wasn’t entirely sure what she was looking for but the last person to look at him that way was Joe after he’d been shot at and his cousin was making sure he hadn’t been injured.

Apparently satisfied he was physically okay, her dark eyes slid past him to rest on Joe and Levon. Given their earlier conference link up Tony was fairly certain she knew who Levon was. And figuring out who Joe was wouldn’t take much of a leap of logic for her or the others, especially not since Gibbs had probably told them who to expect. He knew Joe and Levon were fully aware of who the people were in front of him as well, but good manners dictated he at least make an introduction of some kind since this was the first time they’d truly met in person.

“Abby, McGee, Ziva, these guys are Joe LaFiamma and Levon Lundy.”

“Joe, Levon,” Tony waved a hand toward his former teammates, “Abby Scuito, Timothy McGee, and Ziva David. Gibbs’ team.”

“We are your team too,” Abby blurted out, and then immediately sent a contrite look toward Ziva and McGee. “I’m sorry. I know we all agreed not to push immediately. And I know I promised I wouldn’t do anything but hug him, that I wouldn’t say anything or get carried away but it is so hard to just—”

“Abby—” McGee tried to interrupt her steady stream of words.

“stand here and let Tony act like he’s not part of our family any more. It’s not right—“
“Abby—” It was Ziva this time.

“We messed up and we have to make it right.” Abby’s hands flailed wildly, tears welling up and threatening to spill over. “We might have already waited too long! We should have—“

“Abby.” Gibbs said her name quietly and yet it was enough to silence her. She blushed, looking guilty, feet shuffling uneasily.

Tony didn’t like seeing that expression on her face or the uncertain posture. She hadn’t done anything wrong. Not really. It was unrealistic to expect Abby not to speak her mind, or express her emotions.

“It’s okay, Abby.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t look as upset either. He smiled at her, putting as much warmth and acceptance as he could into his expression. “It’s okay.”

She nodded, smiling back at him. Tony hoped she hadn’t read more into his expression and words than he intended. He didn’t want to mislead her into thinking he was coming back to DC. Or that everything was square between him and the team. He hadn’t forgotten the reasons he’d left in the first place even if he wasn’t nearly as angry or bitter about them any more.

Tony opened his mouth to clarify himself, to make sure Abby…and everyone else understood. But before he could say anything his name was called. Or rather someone mispronounced his name in a tone that demanded attention.

Tony sighed, as he turned. “Hello, Fornell.”

Fornell strode forward, his ever present long coat flapping about him as he moved. Agent Sacks trailed along behind, a dark scowl on his face. Tony couldn’t resist winking at the FBI agent.

“Slacks.” Tony deliberately goaded the man by using the wrong name knowing how much it annoyed him. Sacks glared at him. He really should learn to control himself better, Tony thought. Tony had never reacted to Fornell’s abuse of his surname, not because it didn’t annoy him but because he didn’t want to give the FBI the satisfaction of knowing it bugged him.

“What can I do for the FBI?” Tony asked, keeping his tone genial.

“Where the hell as Gibbs been hiding you?” Fornell demanded.

“Hiding?” Tony arched an eyebrow. “Why would he be hiding me?”

“You no doubt already know why.” The muscles in Fornell’s jaw flexed. “Now where the hell have you been?”

“I was at home.” Tony shrugged.
“Bullshit.” Fornell scowled. “I sent agents to your place. You were never—“

“No, you sent agents to where I used to live. My home is in Houston now. Which is very convenient because it’s also where I’ve been working.” Tony smirked. “If anything you should be grateful to Gibbs for going out of his way to let me know you need to speak with me.”

Fornell stared at him. “Houston?”

“It’s a city in Texas,” Levon supplied helpfully, his drawl far more pronounced than usual as he deliberately played up the ‘good old boy’ routine. “Pretty sure most people even this far North have heard of it.”

Tony didn’t need to look to know Levon’s eyes were alight with mischief. It was all he could do not to laugh at the expression on Fornell’s face.

“Who are you?”

“Sergeant Levon Lundy, Houston PD. And before you ask, the other feller you don’t know is Joe LaFiamma. We are work with Tony.”

“For how long?”

“Couple of months.”

“Gibbs, why the hell didn’t you tell me he’d left NCIS?”

“You didn’t ask,” Gibbs returned mildly.

Fornell didn’t look happy, but then Tony had never seen the man look happy. He wondered if the FBI agent even knew how to smile. But then, the guy had a little girl, so maybe he did…most people smiled for their kids. Unless he was like Tony’s father, then maybe he only smiled for her in social settings when it was required.

“I understand you’ve got some questions for me,” Tony said. He’d like to move this along and get it over with.

“I do.”

“You’ll do the interview here.” Gibbs’ statement clearly wasn’t a request. “In one of our rooms.”

Fornell looked as if he might challenge Gibbs before he nodded. Tony had never quite understood their relationship. They reminded him of a couple of terriers. A lot of snarling and snapping but it was hard to know if they really meant it or if it was just part of their innate nature.
Fornell might have given in because of the hostile looks coming from Ziva, McGee and Abby, and the way they started to fan out, moving into flanking positions. Not that they likely intimidated Fornell much. Well, Ziva maybe since her ability to be lethal was common knowledge. But, collectively, they did have Fornell and Sacks outnumbered.

“And I’ll be sitting in on the interview,” Joe added.

Fornell raised both eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll be acting as Tony’s legal counsel.”

Joe had suggested this course of action when they’d gone jogging. Even though Joe and Levon were law enforcement officers they didn’t have any standing when it came to a federal case. Making Joe Tony’s legal representative guaranteed he’d have the authority to consult with his ‘client’ whenever he needed to, and could have access to any evidence currently on file or discovered later. It would keep Joe and Levon in the loop without the need for any sort of ‘special interagency cooperation’ bullshit.

Fornell gave Joe an appraising look. “You’re not an attorney.”

“And I don’t need to be one,” Joe smiled. “It has become common practice that an attorney is used, but nothing in the law mandates a suspect’s counsel be a licensed member of the bar. The only definitive requirement is that a subject be provided with someone capable of giving him sound legal advice with his best interest in mind. And I am fully capable of doing that.”

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding,” Sacks rolled his eyes.

“Whether it is me or an attorney of Tony’s choosing, he will have counsel present.” Joe’s statement was flat, leaving no room for argument. That didn’t stop Sacks from trying though.

“You think you need an attorney,” Sacks snorted, his tone implying the only reason Tony would need one is if he had something to hide.

“It’s not a question of need, it’s about his rights.” Levon said mildly, but there was no denying the sharp undertone. “Or were y’all just planning to run roughshod over that little rule of law?”

“It is not as if they haven’t before,” Ziva pointed out. “They did try to pin another murder on Tony.”

“Never even read him his rights before they put him in a holding cell,” McGee added.

Sacks grimaced, clearly not happy with the reminder of that case. “He hasn’t even been formally charged with anything.”

“Because you never honor anyone’s rights until then.” Levon shook his head. “No damn wonder the FBI has so much trouble closing cases.”
“Hey, you can’t—“

“Sacks,” Fornell growled, silencing his agent’s protest. “LaFiamma can sit in on the interview.” He scowled at Gibbs. “I’m not going to tolerate any more interference from you, your team, or anyone else in my investigation.”

Gibbs just shrugged it off, and the rest of his team did likewise following his lead. Tony knew Joe and Levon would ignore the warning as well. They didn’t answer to Fornell, or Gibbs either for that matter. It was one of the reasons he was glad they’d insisted on coming with him. It was decidedly reassuring to have people in his corner that had no other objective than to make sure he was okay, who didn’t have to answer to anyone else or have ulterior motives.

Tony wondered what Fornell would think if he knew Gibbs had been left in the dark about his and Joe’s decision to make Joe his legal representative. Tony hadn’t seen the need to discuss it with Gibbs. It wasn’t like he had to have the other man’s approval. But it was probably better if Fornell remained unenlightened and let him think the idea had been one of Gibbs’ ploys. Having people underestimate him was something Tony made use of most of his life.

“Happy now?”

“Ecstatic.” Tony smiled tightly.

He would rather not do this at all, but he didn’t have a choice. At least this time, he knew the evidence they had was crap. It wasn’t nearly as good as what Chip had manufactured to frame him for murder. Odds were the case likely had nothing to really do with him at all, although he found that to be small consolation. Hopefully, while Fornell was tying to rake him over the coals, Gibbs could get everyone else busy on the plan they’d worked out on the plane to keep the rest of NCIS from getting coated in Shepard’s mess… assuming the former Marine didn’t think of something better on his own to implement.

Tony squared his shoulders, meeting Fornell’s gaze. “Shall we find us a quiet place to chat?”
Gibbs watched with narrowed eyes as Tony and LaFiamma walked with Fornell and Sacks toward the interrogation rooms. While Gibbs was glad Tony didn't have to be in with Fornell alone, he was decidedly disappointed Tony had made this plan without including him. It was further proof that he wasn't the guy Tony relied on to watch his back.

Gibbs shook his head. It didn't matter that he wasn't Tony's first choice, or if he was even in the room with him, he still had the younger man's six. He wasn't going to let him down.

"Ziva find out where the FBI's hiding Jeanne Benoit."

Ziva arched an eyebrow, clearly curious as to why Gibbs wanted to know where Jeanne Benoit was, but she didn't ask. She simply nodded once, accepting the order and headed for her desk.

Gibbs knew the 'woman scorned' thing was plausible, but he wanted to hear from Dr. Benoit the real reason she was trying to frame Tony for murder. She was something of a victim herself in this mess, and Tony still cared about her, so Gibbs was prepared to be gentle when he questioned her. But when it came right down to it, his main intent was going to be getting her to confess her statement about Tony killing Rene Benoit was a lie. Proving Tony innocent was his top priority. It was, however, not the only thing on his list.

"McGee and Abby, track down Trent Kort."

He and Tony had talked about how to keep the rest of the team and the agency from getting tarred and feathered by Shepard's actions and Kort might well be the key to doing just that. With Rene Benoit dead, Kort was in a position to take over the entire operation and become the real man in charge rather than just being the power behind the throne. That should make the CIA's job a lot easier, especially when their pet gun runner had been looking to fly the coop and leave them high and dry. They owed NCIS a debt...if not for taking care of La Grenouille, then for Gibbs not putting a cap in Kort's head for blowing up Tony's car and letting them all think he was dead.

"And get him here."

McGee blinked at him. "Ah...Boss...how do we-"
Gibbs glared at him. He didn't care if McGee brought Kort in cuffed and gagged as long as the CIA operative was brought to the Naval Yard where Gibbs could question him in private. Kort was no innocent bystander; he didn't need to be handled with kid gloves.

McGee snapped his mouth shut and nodded, obviously reading Gibbs feelings on the matter from his expression. "On it, Boss."

It was only after his team was busy that Gibbs headed after Tony. He was honestly surprised to find Lundy walking with him as he strode down the hall. He'd forgotten about the man. Until now, Gibbs hadn't noticed how quiet or still Lundy could be. The man moved just as silently as Gibbs did.

"Why didn't you go with Tony?"

"Because Joe's the only one who has permission to sit in on the interrogation. And I doubt Special Agent Fornell would agree to let me watch from the observation room." Lundy shrugged. "I figured it was better to wait for you. This is your house; you don't have to ask for permission."

"Damn right I don't have to ask for permission," Gibbs almost growled.

Gibbs glared at Sacks when the FBI agent looked like he might move to deny him access. He pretended not to notice the cheeky, wagging fingers wave Lundy gave to Sacks as he followed Gibbs into the observation room. Gibbs was sorely tempted to shut Lundy out of the room, but LaFiamma and Tony would not doubt fill him in. And he felt like he owed the man.

Even though, Fornell and Tony had been in the room for a few minutes Gibbs knew he hadn't missed anything important. Tony had an infinite number of delaying tactics and using a few was almost standard operating procedure. Getting the team working without Fornell knowing about what they were doing or why had been part of the plan Gibbs and Tony had discussed on the plane. They both expected Fornell to be at the Naval Yard---albeit neither had really anticipated him showing up as quickly as he had, but they had talked about a worst case scenario. Gibbs now better understood why Tony had been so confident he could keep Fornell focused exclusively on him and that Gibbs would have all the time he needed to get the team working.

Gibbs stepped up to the glass, assessing the well lit room on the other side. Tony didn't look agitated or concerned. LaFiamma's expression was equally neutral, except for his eyes.
"Joe is even worse at poker than I am," Lundy commented softly, tsking. "Eyes give him away ever time."

"Controlling his temper going to be a problem?"

"Not unless losing it will work in his favor." Lundy grinned at Gibbs' sceptical expression. "He might come across as a hot head, but Joe's not going to blow up with Tony counting on him."

Gibbs nodded grimly. "He better not."

"Like you can do anything in here until it was already done." Lundy rolled his eyes. "You'd be closing the barn door after the horse got out."

Gibbs' jaw clenched. He really could hate this man so easily. Gibbs decided it was more productive to focus on what was going on in the other room.

"Cut the bullshit, DiNozzo." Fornell was leaning forward in his chair. Gibbs didn't have to see his expression to know he was glaring at Tony. "Just answer the damn question."

"I'd been at NCIS long enough." Tony calmly folded his hands in front of him not at all intimidated by Fornell's display of anger. "It was time to look for greener pastures."

Gibbs pursed his lips. It made sense that Fornell would start by wanting to know when Tony had left NCIS and why. The man really should do a better job with his research. Clearly his staff was no where near as thorough as Gibbs' when it came to background and detail.

"Federal agent to cop is a bit of step down, isn't it?" Fornell's tone was not quite snide, but he was very close to it.

"Depends on who you ask." Tony shrugged, smiling easily. "It's not like anyone even knows what NCIS is half the time. As a cop, at least I don't have to explain who I work for any more."
"You could have transferred to another agency."

That comment made Gibbs frown. It almost sounded like Fornell had offered Tony a job at some point. He couldn't see Tony going to the FBI but then he never thought Tony would quit NCIS and his team either.

"I could have," Tony agreed calmly, "I didn't want to."

From the way Fornell's shoulders stiffened, Gibbs had an answer to his earlier musing. Fornell had offered Tony a job. And he'd turned it down. That almost made Gibbs smile.

"Looking for a change of scenery then?" Fornell asked, sarcasm rife in his tone.

Tony smiled again, but it was more forced this time. "Something like that."

"And it's just a coincidence that you left the area right after Rene Benoit's death?"

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but LaFiamma laid a restraining hand on his arm. "When exactly did Mr. Benoit die?" LaFiamma asked calmly, forcing Fornell to shift his focus. "Gibbs didn't supply any specifics when he said Tony would have to return to DC to speak with you."

Nice cover, Gibbs thought. It wouldn't do for Fornell to know just how much they already knew about the FBI's case. Hopefully, they'd never find out about McGee hacking into their records or Lundy calling in favors.

Fornell snorted. "I'll bet he didn't."

"Tony left DC just over three months ago." LaFiamma leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on the table, ignoring Fornell's comment with an ease Gibbs hadn't thought he would be capable of. "You implied that Mr. Benoit died about the same time. Is that in fact the case?"
"I'll be asking the questions here, LaFiamma."

LaFiamma's expression hardened. "I will remind you I am acting as Tony's legal counsel. You can tell me now, or I will find out when you are forced to provide me with a full accounting of the evidence in this case courtesy of court order. The choice is yours, but if you don't answer my question this interview is over."

Fornell's spine straightened. "I could charge him and lock him in a cell-"

"You could, but it won't change anything." LaFiamma's tone was mild. "You'll still have to tell me what evidence you have. And Tony won't talk to you without counsel."

LaFiamma didn't look smug, even though he had the right to. He was right. Gibbs knew it had to be pissing Fornell off. He'd let himself be maneuvered into a corner.

Lundy grinned, pride readily apparent in his expression and stance. "Joe might suck at poker, but he's damn good at playing chicken." He started to count slowly, and when he reached four, LaFiamma stood up, his hand on Tony's shoulder.

"Time to go, Tony."

"Sit down," Fornell ordered.

"Then answer the question." LaFiamma counted. "Or this discussion is over."

Fornell huffed out a breath. "He died almost five months ago."

"That's more than a month before Tony left for Houston." LaFiamma rolled his eyes, taking his seat again. "The man being dead and Tony's leaving have nothing to do with one another."

"The man’s daughter says differently," Fornell snarled.
"Jeanne?" Tony did a good job of looking surprised. "What does she have to do with this?"

"You were dating her, weren't you?"

"Yes," Tony answered warily, eyeing Fornell.

"Even though she was just a means to an end...a way to get closer to her father, you fell in love with her. Didn't you?" Fornell sneered, shaking his head. "Not the smartest move you've ever made, DiNozzo."

That was a direct hit given the way Tony paled. Gibbs wanted to belt Fornell. It was below the belt and he was sure the FBI agent knew it. But Gibbs also felt a rush of pride when Tony didn't respond immediately, but took a slow, deep breath obviously waiting until he was in control until answering.

"Yes, dating her was part of an undercover assignment." Tony cleared his throat. "And it wasn't smart, but yes, I fell in love with her."

"You wanted to protect her, to keep her safe. Only natural. No one would fault you for trying to see to it she didn't get hurt." Fornell leaned forward. "But that wasn't going to happen with dear old dad around, was it? His enemies already tried to kill her by blowing up your car."

"Actually, I think it was the CIA who blew up my car." Tony grimaced. "But given how easily they change allegiance, I suppose you could say La Grenouille's enemies tried to kill his daughter by blowing up my car."

"She was in danger, and you knew it," Fornell stated quietly.

Tony closed his eyes, nodding. "La Grenouille went off the grid, and I thought she went with him. The last sighting we had of him said a young woman was with him. I thought he would keep her safe."

"Damn hard for him to do that when he was already dead."
"I didn't know that." Tony didn't quite shout, but his voice was tight with anger.

Gibbs almost headed for the door, ready to toss Fornell out on his ass, but his better sense prevailed. He saw both Lundy and LaFiamma's hands curl into fists. They clearly both felt the same way.

"Where did she go?" LaFiamma interjected, sounding far more in control than Gibbs expected given how much fury resided in his eyes. "If her father has been dead this long, how did she manage to stay under the radar until now? Why didn't she come forward sooner?"

Those were questions Gibbs wouldn't mind knowing the answer to as well. He was hoping to ask the woman herself.

"You don't know where she went?" Fornell's question was directed more to Tony than LaFiamma.

Tony shook his head. "Ziva and I went to Jeanne's place when we realized she was the target, but she was already gone by then."

"You didn't try to find her?"

"No." Tony swallowed hard, looking away.

Gibbs wondered if he felt guilty about not looking for her. He had no idea what Tony could have done to make things right, but he knew the younger man likely felt he should have tried. There was no guarantee she'd have even listened to anything he had to say. And he had every reason to think La Grenouille would keep Jeanne safe; her father had done so for years. But given how Tony still felt about her...it struck Gibbs as odd he hadn't at least tried to track her down.

"Jeanne left Tony a note. Asked him to choose." Lundy offered, somehow knowing Gibbs lacked that bit of information. "She said she wasn't coming back and she wanted him to decide whether he would go with her or stay." Brown eyes met blue. "Personally I don't think either option, her or NCIS, was worth a tinker's damn."
Gibbs glared at Lundy. He met the fierce gaze without flinching.

"She went to Africa," Fornell said, drawing Gibbs attention away from Lundy and back to Tony. "She says she went there to help people and thought it would be a good place to hide."

LaFiamma arched an eyebrow. "Guess she was right about the hiding part if it took you this long to find her."

"The woman was going to work in a canoe, dodging hippos and crocodiles." Fornell huffed out a breath in annoyance. "It wasn't like paved roads and cell service were readily available."

LaFiamma rolled his eyes. "So you located her and after her time in the wilds of the Dark Continent she's got enough courage to come forward and tell you Tony murdered her father?"

"We promised to keep her safe." Fornell's chin came up and Gibbs didn't have to see his face to know what expression the FBI agent was wearing.

"If Tony killed her father to keep her safe as you've suggested as his possible motive, then she was never in any danger from him to start with." LaFiamma snorted. "And if it wasn't Tony, then whoever did kill Mr. Benoit, if they still thought his daughter was a viable target, they would have taken her out long before now. It wouldn't have mattered whether or not there was cell service or roads around to make the job easier. People willing and able to put a bomb in a federal agent's car usually don't give up easily. And if the FBI could find her, hell, anyone could."

Gibbs could see a flush rising across the back of Fornell's neck. He fought off a smile. Lundy just chuckled.

"Joe's not real good at winning friends."

"I can see that."

"He's hell on wheels in the bedroom though," Lundy grinned. "I always figured it was a fair trade off. Might even put him one up."
"Too much information," Gibbs said with a smile, feeling oddly proud to know Lundy trusted him enough to toss out a teasing tidbit that only two days ago he never would have offered.

"I can understand why you'd need to investigate Miss Benoit's claim that her father was murdered. It's your job." LaFiamma cocked his head to one side. "But just from the little you've told us, Special Agent Fornell, there isn't much of a case here. The word of a jilted lover? Hardly damning testimony...unless there is some forensic evidence to back up her statement."

"We have the gun he was killed with."

"It's not mine," Tony declared flatly. "All my weapons are accounted for."

"No, it isn't yours," Fornell admitted. "But you could have had access to it."

"Could have? That's hardly corroborating evidence. But it does mean the gun belonged to someone Tony knows or worked with." LaFiamma eyed Fornell. "So what fish are you really looking to fry?"

"I think we are done here." Fornell stood up. "For now."

"Oh, I don't think so." LaFiamma stood as well.

"I said we're done," Fornell all but snarled. He pointed a finger at Tony. "Don't leave town."

Tony blinked innocently back at him. "I'll be around."

LaFiamma muttered something in what sounded like Italian as Fornell stormed out of the room. Tony laughed softly, patting LaFiamma on the back. "Don't worry, Joe, I'm pretty sure you'll get a chance to do just that."
"Sure as hell hope so," LaFiamma grimaced. He looked at the mirror. "Lundy, you hear all that?"

Lundy tapped on the mirror twice. LaFiamma nodded. He and Tony headed for the door. Gibbs and Lundy met them in the hall.

"Let's go get lunch," Lundy suggested.

"You aren't going to work the case?" Gibbs asked in surprise.

"What's to work?" LaFiamma raised both eyebrows. "You've got your team on it, right? We gave you plenty of time to get them--"

"Yes, they are working on it." Gibbs snapped back at him.

"Well, there you go." LaFiamma grinned. "Nothing for us to do until they take care of those loose ends." He slapped Lundy on the back. "You're buying."

"Means I get to pick."

"Shit," LaFiamma cursed. "Tony tell me they don't sell barbeque around here."

Tony laughed. "They have everything around here."

"Sweet." Lundy bumped fists with Tony. He looked at Gibbs. "You coming with us, or are you planning on riding herd on your people?"

For a second Gibbs was torn. He should help his team...not that he normally made a habit of doing so, or at least he hadn't when Tony was there. But he was leery of letting Tony out of his sight. There was no telling if LaFiamma and Lundy wouldn't try to skip town with him. They had a private jet at their disposal after all, and Tony was under no real obligation to stay.
"I'll go with you."

Lundy held out his hand to LaFiamma, grinning. "Told you."

LaFiamma grimaced and gave his partner a dollar. "Asshole."

Gibbs thought he should be pissed that they'd obviously bet on what his decision would be. But he couldn't bring himself to give a damn. They could have any bet they wanted, it didn't affect his ultimate objective. He still hoped to convince Tony to come back to NCIS. And making sure Tony stayed where he could keep an eye on him was part and parcel to that.

"Let's go."
Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Finding Jeanne Benoit was not particularly difficult for Ziva. McGee had already hacked into the FBI computer system storing every detail he'd found about the La Grenouille case where Ziva could access it. And she had her own contacts she could call for information. She had a location in less than an hour.

It was almost cliché that the FBI had put Jeanne Benoit up in a swank hotel in downtown DC. But then the FBI wasn't known for its imagination. Ziva supposed she should be grateful they hadn't made her job any harder, but if someone were really targeting Dr. Benoit the FBI's 'safe house' wouldn't have done much to keep her out of harms way.

She'd called Gibbs to let him know she'd located Dr. Benoit. The curt order to bring her to the Naval Yard didn't surprise Ziva at all, although, the fact that he didn't want to do it himself had. He hung up before she could get the chance to ask where he was and why he wasn't going to come with her.

Ziva sighed. She hoped he was with Tony. She'd seen Fornell and his lackey go down the hall; they were likely still in the building somewhere. She hadn't seen Tony or Gibbs since they'd gone to the interrogation rooms. Even after all they'd learned about LaFiamma and Lundy, Ziva didn't trust them. They obviously cared about Tony, but she couldn't help seeing them as an obstacle to returning Tony to his rightful place on the team.

Getting to the hotel did not take long. Ziva suspected Fornell had chosen it simply because of its close proximity to the Naval Yard. Although, the high end nature of it may have made it Benoit's choice.

Not for the first time did Ziva wonder exactly what it was Tony had seen in her. Oh, Jeanne was pretty enough there was no denying that. But if simple physical beauty were enough to satisfy him, Tony would have fallen in love a dozen times over; that was clearly not the case.

Jeanne's profession suggested above average intelligence. And while Tony might act immature and silly at times, he was far from stupid so it made sense he'd be attracted to someone of equal intelligence. He would want someone who could challenge him.

But Ziva would have thought he'd want someone who was more than just intellectually his equal. She thought he'd have fallen for someone fully capable of taking care for herself. Jeanne struck Ziva as a rich, little daddy's girl looking for a knight in shining armor to sweep her off her feet and take care of her. To Ziva, Jeanne was...soft, weak, in need of protection.

And maybe that was what appealed to Tony, except that he also had deep feelings for Paula Cassidy. Cassidy was a strong, capable woman, easily Tony's equal. In Ziva's opinion, Cassidy would have been a better match for him than Jeanne as a girlfriend or wife. It was a shame she died in the line of duty.

Perhaps there was more to Jeanne than Ziva realized. Maybe she had hidden depths, value and worth Ziva hadn't seen. But what Ziva had or hadn't seen was no longer an issue. The woman had accused Tony of murder and whatever she might have been to him then she was now an enemy, a betrayer.

It didn't matter that Ziva might understand Jeanne's motives. She could easily relate to wanting revenge for heartbreak and perfidy. She'd killed her own brother for similar reasons. His being a traitor to Israel was the justification, but not the reason she'd actually put a bullet in his head. He had lied to her, abused her trust and faith in him, denied all they'd professed to stand for, and in doing so diminished them both. That wasn't something she would have ever allowed to go unanswered. His betrayal of Israel didn't require Ziva to be his executioner, but his betrayal of her demanded nothing less.

For Jeanne to accuse Tony of murder and use the FBI as her means of revenge was another reason Ziva
thought her weak. She didn't have balls enough to act on her own, for herself.

Ziva didn't think Jeanne was making her accusations just to get back at Tony for lying to her. It was the only crime he'd committed against her, and while not inexcusable, it was hardly the sort of thing that warranted such an extreme measure.

No, Ziva suspected Jeanne wanted to hurt Tony not for lying but for knowing more about her father than she had. He was there when Jeanne found out her father wasn't a harmless businessman but a merchant of death. Tony knew daddy dearest had lied to her, knew he'd been lying for her entire life. Finding out the man she'd loved and trusted for years, the man she'd looked to for guidance and safety, wasn't who she thought he was would have been far more devastating than learning her boyfriend of a few months had lied about who he was. She was looking for a scapegoat, someone to blame for what she'd lost, someone she could hurt the same way she'd been hurt.

Tony was simply an easy target for Jeanne to vent all her hurt and anger upon. And that was another reason for Ziva's derision. She had little respect for people who took the easy, obvious way.

Getting Jeanne to the Naval Yard was as easy as finding her had been. Ziva didn't know if Fornell had called ahead, knowing Gibbs well enough to suspect what his next move would be or if the FBI agent escorting Jeanne was far too naïve and trusting. She hoped it was the former, because flashing a badge and stating who she was shouldn't have been enough to make him relinquish Jeanne into Ziva's custody. At the very least he should have verified her ID or offered to go along with Jeanne.

"Is this about, Tony?" Jeanne asked, her tone hesitant and expression pensive.

Ziva nearly snorted. That little girl lost might work on men, but Ziva wasn't fooled.

"Is there someone else at NCIS you've accused of murder?"

Jeanne paled and looked away. They completed the rest of the trip in silence. Ziva would have liked to ask more questions, but she knew silence was far more intimidating. It would naturally unsettle Jeanne more than if Ziva bombarded her with questions, demanding answers. It would warm her up for Gibbs. Ziva successfully stifled the smile that thought engendered.

She escorted Jeanne to an interrogation room. "Someone will be with you shortly," Ziva told her before leaving.

Ziva headed for her desk, not entirely surprised to see Gibbs, Tony, LaFiamma and Lundy standing in front of the plasma screen, talking in low voices to one another. Her eyebrows rose when she realized the screen was blank. She wondered if that was because they didn't want to put up the details of the case where anyone passing by could see them, or if it was because McGee was not around to display the information for them. The latter she dismissed. It isn't as though Tony hasn't taken command of the remote before, all but fighting for it at times. She frowned, shaking her head. He'd done that when he worked for NCIS but perhaps he no longer felt it was his place.

She wanted to yell at him that it could still be his place; he never had to leave at all. Ziva bit her tongue. Tony had offered consolation to Abby when she had her earlier outburst, but Ziva knew one from her would not be well received. Not only was it not her nature to be that way, she knew convincing him to come back would take a level headed approach not an emotional one.

Ziva was sure she hadn't misread Tony when he told Abby it was okay. He didn't mean he was coming back, or that everything was fine between them. No, he clearly meant he wasn't upset by her outburst; she didn't need to feel guilty or ashamed about speaking her mind. It was just Abby being Abby.
"You get her settled?" Gibbs asked, somehow knowing Ziva was there even though he'd never once glanced in her direction.

Ziva nodded. "She is in interrogation room three."

Tony's jaw clenched, clearly knowing who she was. "Maybe I should talk to-

"Not a good idea," LaFiamma argued.

Tony glared at him. "Joe-"

"You asked me to act as your legal counsel." LaFiamma shrugged. "That's what I'm doing. And we don't want anyone to claim witness tampering."

Tony looked offended. "You know I wouldn't-"

"Yes, I know you wouldn't, but that doesn't mean someone else trying to make his bones on a high profile case wouldn't accuse you of it." LaFiamma's expression turned apologetic. "You know how legal things are. Truth can be less important than the perception. It is better you don't talk to her until this is settled."

"I just want a chance to apolog-"

"Nothing you say right now in the way of an apology is going to change the fact that she was angry enough to accuse you of murder." LaFiamma shook his head. "Let's deal with making sure we can get the case dismissed before we worry about making nice with her. The last thing we what is for anything you say to her to come back and bite you in the ass. You'll have a lot more time to talk to her without this hanging over your head."

Tony sighed heavily. "Don't you ever get tired of being right?"

LaFiamma gave him a rueful smile. "Sometimes."

Ziva was impressed that LaFiamma managed to convince Tony he was right so easily. She'd certainly never been able to sway him with so little effort. The only one Tony had ever given into so quickly that she knew of was Gibbs. Ziva considered how much trust Tony must have in LaFiamma to follow his lead and let him dictate his actions. Tony was closer to his cousin than the team had theorized.

"You going to do the interrogation?" Tony asked, looking at Gibbs.

Gibbs gave him a look Ziva knew well. Gibbs routinely used it whenever one of the team said something that he considered stupid.

"Right. Stupid question." Tony sighed, fingers running through his hair. "Go easy on her, will you?"

"Tony," Gibbs frowned, "she accused you of murder."

"I know." Tony made a meaningless gesture with one hand. "But if I hadn't...if Shepard...Look, she's not some hardened criminal. I'm just asking that you don't treat her as one."

Blue eyes met green. Gibbs nodded once. It had all the weight of a promise. Ziva hoped keeping it wouldn't tie Gibbs' hands. Dr. Benoit's feelings were far less important to Ziva than Tony's.
Ziva felt guilty when it occurred to her that Tony's feelings hadn't always come first. Getting one up on him had been far more important than any damage her words and actions might have inflicted. She never thought he'd taken any of it to heart, not until he alluded to it in his letter to her. Only rereading it as many times as she'd watched the security footage of his last visit to the Naval Yard had given her insight to what was written between the lines. He hadn't shrugged off things as easily as she'd assumed.

"You mind if I watch the interrogation?" LaFiamma asked, managing to imply the question was only asked out of courtesy. There was no doubt he'd be observing regardless of Gibbs' answer.

Gibbs gave LaFiamma a dark look before nodding curtly. "Should have Fornell watch too."

"Might be educational for the man," Lundy said, a faint smile curling the outer edges of his lips upward. "God knows the man could use some smarting up."

"Always thought so myself." Gibbs surprised Ziva by actually chuckling. "I'll call him."

Gibbs headed for his desk. Why he'd opt for his landline over his cell Ziva didn't know. There was a lot about him she didn't quite understand.

Ziva squared her shoulders, stepping closer to Tony. She wasn't sure if this was the right time to speak with him, but so much time had already passed she was leery of waiting any longer. Once things were settled with the FBI and Jeanne Benoit, Tony could leave again. Ziva couldn't let him slip away a second time.

"Tony, may I speak with you?" She glanced toward Lundy and LaFiamma. "Privately."

Tony hesitated. He traded looks with Lundy and LaFiamma. An entire conversation took place between them without anyone saying a word. Ziva resented the other men for this obvious ease of communication with Tony. She thought she'd had it once with him, but evidently she was mistaken or he'd have never left so abruptly.

Watching their faces, Ziva could tell Lundy was leaving the decision up to Tony. LaFiamma on the other hand shifted his gaze from Tony to Ziva. He eyed her with open suspicion.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Tony said, clearly trying to sway his cousin.

LaFiamma grimaced, sighing quietly. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Just don't get in an elevator with her."

Ziva felt her face warm hearing LaFiamma's warning. The reference was too obvious for her to miss. He had to know about a suspect dying in her custody while in the elevator.

Ziva cleared her throat. "That was an accident."

"Not entirely sure how you can accidentally kill a man with your bare hands." LaFiamma snorted, eyes regarding her coldly. "Not like you can claim you didn't know they were loaded."

"Joe." Tony's tone managed to include both a reprimand and a warning in that one word.

To Ziva's astonishment LaFiamma didn't say anything else. She wouldn't have expected someone so rabid about protecting Tony to relent so quickly. Plainly the trust between them worked both ways. LaFiamma might not agree with Tony's decision to speak with her privately, but he clearly had confidence in Tony's ability to handle himself and make his own choices.
Tony gestured with one hand, indicating Ziva should lead the way. She went to the small alcove behind the stairs. It was as private as she could arrange with so little notice—short of taking over the elevator as Gibbs was wont to do, but she couldn't see LaFiamma allowing that after his earlier comment.

She turned to face Tony. Ziva resisted the urge to fidget, trying for the calm poise she habitually maintained. She took a deep breath, opening her mouth before closing it again. She didn't know where to start and bit back a curse. How as she going to convince him to stay if she couldn't even speak? How could she sway him with logic if she had no idea what to say?

Tony cocked his head to one side. "You okay?"

"This is...I wanted...Damn." Ziva huffed in frustration. "I do not know where to begin."

Tony smiled, eyes warm with genuine amusement. Rather than being angry over his enjoyment at her expense, Ziva found herself trying to remember the last time she's seen him smile and mean it. She'd taken his ready smile for granted, not realizing until he was gone how long it had been since she'd seen him smile with honest good humor.

Months before he left his smile hadn't reached his eyes, and it looked forced rather than natural. Ziva had blamed it on his relationship with Jeanne, but in hindsight, she realized the change had happened after Gibbs left.

"Starting at the beginning is usually the best place." Tony's voice was gentle, encouraging, and it was a tone she'd heard him use only once with her—after Roy had died. She'd rebuffed him then, not wanting his sympathy or his pity.

"I am not sure where that is," Ziva admitted with a sigh. She reached out to touch his arm, unaccountably pleased that he did not draw back from her. "I have missed you."

"Yeah, Gibbs mentioned that."

"You do not sound as though you believed him."

Tony shrugged. "Couldn't think of why you would."

"What?" Her mouth dropped open. "Tony, how can you say that?"

Greene eyes narrowed. "You really want me to give you the entire list, or would the top ten be enough?"

Ziva flushed. In his letter, he'd mentioned he was confident she and the team would be just fine without him slowing them down. He'd written that between McGee's genius level intellect, Abby's magic machines, Gibbs' gut, and Ziva's scary assassin skills they'd never even know he was gone. He'd described himself as someone readily replaced, having no special training or unique skills. She'd characterized him the same way not long after Gibbs had left letting Tony know he was not Gibbs and he should stop pretending to be anything more than what he was. She hadn't realized how harsh the words must have sounded until seeing them parroted back to her in black and white.

"Tony, I didn't mean-"

"Yes, you did." Tony gave her a bitter smile. "If it's one thing you've always been Ziva it is unfailingly honest with your insults. No reason to take them back now."

She wanted to apologize, to -take back' the insult, but couldn't force the words -I'm sorry' out. She opted for
"This is why the ends rarely justify the means...what you mean to happen isn't always what you get in the end." Tony shook his head. "And I am not a necessary part of the team. You guys are doing just fine without me."

"No, we are not."

"Still closing cases, aren't you?"

Oh they closed several, but without Tony it had taken far longer and required a lot more effort. And the resolution of some of them was far less than satisfactory. There was little banter now, no competition, no movie references or sudden leaps of insight, no little boy joy at putting together the pieces of a puzzle successfully.

"Yes, we are still closing cases, but-"

"Then you are doing just fine." Tony smiled, but it didn't reach is eyes. "Results are all that ever mattered, right? As long as the job got done the rest isn't important."

"There is more to this team than just the cases we work." Ziva ground out in frustration.

"Like the dinner I wasn't invited to?" Tony arched an eyebrow. Ziva had forgotten about that. It seemed so long ago now.

"Like taking things on my desk the second you thought I'd died?"

That she could explain. It didn't mean what he thought. But Tony didn't give her a chance.

"Like the fact that you don't trust me and never did?"

"I trusted you." Ziva spat back hotly. "I have always trusted you until you lied about-"

"Bullshit." Tony stepped closer, towering over her. "You went to Gibbs when you were in trouble, not me. You didn't trust me enough to take care of you, to be able to handle the problem. And that was well before anything with La Grenouille entered into the picture."

Tony stepped back. "I was there for this team. I did all I could think of to hold you together when Gibbs left, and you ridiculed me at every turn. You couldn't wait to throw it back at me when I was back to being senior agent."

He shook his head. "And when I needed something...a little support, maybe some understanding over an operation gone bad, something I know full fucking well you have first hand experience with...I wasn't going to get that from you, was I? You were too damn busy making sure I knew I'd let you down to bother asking me how I felt about all of it."

"I tried talking to you." Ziva defended herself.

"You followed me into the men's room, and by the end of that enforced discussion, I was supposed to apologize." Tony rolled his eyes. "Can't see how exactly that helped me much."

"You stepped over the line." He'd brought up her feelings for Roy. He should have known better.
"You leaped over it first, Ziva." Tony glared at her. "It is okay for you to pour salt in an open wound but I'm not allowed to do the same? Think again, sister. You don't have the right to call my romantic judgment into question when your own is far from perfect. And furthermore, you don't get to question my keeping secrets either. It's not like you were ever forthcoming about your spy shit. I never once threw that in your face."

Ziva forced herself to take a deep breath rather than lash out the way she wanted to. Striking Tony would only prove LaFiamma right to be wary of letting Tony spend time alone with her. Ziva was honest enough with herself to realize most of her anger was over how hard it was to argue with Tony when she knew he was right. She mentally slapped herself. She wasn't supposed to be fighting with him in the first place.

"I don't want to fight with you."

"I don't want to fight with you either." Tony rolled his shoulders, the gesture almost visibly releasing tension.

Accepting the statement as a peace offering, Ziva tried to start over. "I really have missed you."

"Missed you too, Sweet Cheeks."

He smiled again. It was soft and warm making it clear he meant that. Ziva was surprised by how much it meant to hear him address her by that annoying little pet name. No one else had ever dared to do such a thing.

"I'm sorry." There were too many things she was sorry for to name. "There is so much I should have done differently."

"I know the feeling." Tony clearly understood. "There are a lot of things I could have been handled better than I did. We all make mistakes."

Ziva nodded, accepting the compromise being offered. They both had regrets, and neither was blameless. But they weren't pointing fingers any more. And it no longer felt like some huge weight bearing down on her.

She made eye contact and held it, hoping she could still accomplish what she'd set out to do---convince him to return. "Nothing is the same without you."

"It wasn't the same when McGee joined the team. It wasn't the same Gerald left, and Palmer took over as Ducky's assistant. It wasn't the same when you replaced Kate. It wasn't the same when Gibbs left or even when he came back." All trace of hurt and anger were gone from his tone. "But I adjusted. You will too."

"I don't want to adjust." It grated on Ziva's nerves that she sounded like a petulant child, but it was the truth. She didn't want to get used to Tony being gone.

"No one ever wants to." Tony reached out and cupped her cheek with one hand. "They just don't get a choice."

"You have a choice. You could come back."

"I could--"

"But you won't." Ziva finished for him, reading the decision in his eyes.
Tony’s thumb caressed her cheek. "I’ve made a good life for myself in Houston."

Ziva swallowed hard, blinking rapidly. She’d hoped he would come back the same way Gibbs had. But Gibbs never formed any ties to Mexico. Gibbs never really wanted to leave or stay gone. Had he wanted to, nothing would have brought him back. Tony had a job. He had friends who cared enough to fly to DC and watch his back. He formed ties and put down roots. He hadn't come back to help the team deal with their problems, he'd come back to address his own.

"Are you happy there?"

"Yeah, I am." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

She kissed his cheek in return. "You deserve to be happy my little Hairy Butt."

"So do you, Sweet Cheeks."

"It will be harder to do without you here."

"Harder, but not impossible. Not for a super secret spy ninja like you. You'll be kicking ass and taking names just like always."

She laughed. It was a bit watery but still there. His humor, as annoying and juvenile as it could be at times, was the thing she missed the most.

"Perhaps I could come visit?"

"I'd like that."

She might not have convinced Tony to return, but at least she knew he didn't hate her. It was a small victory, not nearly what she’d hoped for, yet one Ziva found meaningful nonetheless.

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Tony walked away from Ziva, heading back to Joe and Levon. His conversation with her had gone better than he’d expected.

He could have let all that had happened before he’d left slide—just sweep it under the rug like it didn’t matter, made nice, smiled and accepted whatever explanation or excuse Ziva was prepared to offer and let it go. It wasn’t like he hadn’t done it before; hell, he’d been doing it for most of his time at NCIS. But like his conversation in Houston with Gibbs, Tony opted not to back down. He choose to bring up things that at the time he’d simply tolerated or outright ignored, things he’d made allowances and justifications for because he worked with them, considered them friends and allies.

Tony wasn’t willing to do that any more. He couldn’t help but wonder if things would have turned out differently if he hadn’t been willing to do it then. What would have happened if he’d taken a hard line---if he’d refused to tolerate the head slaps, if he’d never apologized to Ziva, if he’d told McGee to stuff his crap about Tony not being a real team leader, if he’d called Abby on her shrine to Gibbs and how it made him feel.

Tony shook his head. There was no way to know, so it wasn’t worth dwelling on much. What Tony did know was that in Houston, things were different. He wasn’t certain if it was because the team there was different or if it was him who was different. Either way, he was still confident that his life there was better. He was on equal footing there with his coworkers there; he was liked and respected. He hadn’t lied to Ziva when he said he was happy.

Ziva’s apology had been genuine. She hadn’t been sorry for anything said or done at the time, but hindsight had given her a new perspective, much the same way it had for Tony. It was nice to hear her say there was a lot she’d have done differently. There was a lot Tony would have changed too, if given a chance. Unfortunately, the only option was to move forward.

He hoped she’d follow up and actually visit him in Houston. It would be nice if they could establish a friendship that didn’t revolve around the job and maintaining a working relationship. They might actually be completely honest with one another this time; they might even find the common ground Tony suspected existed and was far broader than their previous interactions suggested.

Tony would love to show Ziva around his new city. Ziva thought DC was completely different from her homeland, Houston might seem like Mars to her. Joe certainly thought it was like being on another planet when he first moved there.

“Everything okay, Slick?” Levon asked, bringing Tony’s attention back to his present location.

Tony smiled at his friend. “Everything is just fine, Cowboy.”

Joe looked him over, checking the veracity of that statement for himself. Tony knew it wasn’t because Joe didn’t trust him. It was more like he didn’t always trust Tony’s definition of ‘fine’. That wasn’t without good reason so Tony wasn’t bothered by his cousin’s perusal.

“Fornell will be here in two minutes,” Gibbs said.
He looked annoyed. Tony thought it might be a byproduct of being delayed in questioning Jeanne. It wasn’t like Gibbs had ever been a patient man. But when blue eyes fixed on Tony, he knew it was more than just the delay that was responsible for that look.

“Fornell doesn’t want you anywhere near her, Tony.” Gibbs tone was almost contrite.

Tony bit back the first thing that came to mind. He didn’t think cursing would help. And regardless of how they wanted to play it, right now it was still Fornell and the FBI’s show.

Tony took a slow, deep breath, rubbing a hand over his face. If he was honest with himself, he wasn’t sure he was prepared to see her again anyway…even through one way glass. Earlier he’d wanted to apologize to her, to say something that might make amends for everything that happened between them. With a quiet sigh, Tony realized there wasn’t anything he really could say. He was sorry he’d hurt her, but at the time he thought he was doing the right thing. He hadn’t lied when he said he’d loved her, but Tony doubted that would carry much weight—especially if she didn’t believe him. And since she was accusing him of murder, it was highly unlikely she would believe anything other the worst about him.

“Tony?” Joe laid a hand on his shoulder.

Tony blinked. “I’m okay.”

Joe snorted. “Try again.”

“I’ll be okay.” It didn’t hurt as much as it had just a few days ago when he’d first heard Gibbs say Jeanne had accused him of murdering her father. Maybe in a few more days it would hurt even less.

Joe smiled, giving his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I will watch the interrogation.”

“I know.” It was heartening to know Joe would keep an eye on things. His cousin always had Tony’s well being as his primary focus.

“I will find out the truth, DiNozzo.” Gibbs made it sound like a promise.

“Never had any doubts on that score, Gibbs.” Tony smirked. Gibbs was the best he’d ever seen when it came to interrogation. The man hadn’t missed a trick in all the time Tony had known him. Even agreeing to go easy on Jeanne, Tony was confident Gibbs could get her to tell the truth.

Tony found himself at a loss as to what to do with himself. He wasn’t allowed to watch the interrogation, there were no leads to follow up on, no paperwork to file, no facts to check. Tony shifted his weight restlessly. It felt decidedly odd to have nothing to do on a floor where he used to log up to fifteen hours a day when working a case. It was another difference which highlighted how much had changed.

“Maybe I’ll just…” Tony sighed, racking his brain for something before settling on, “go talk to Ducky.”
Ducky wasn’t assigned anything with the case. He should be in the morgue. And Tony wouldn’t mind seeing his friend face to face. Of all his old teammates, Ducky had always been the easiest to talk to.

“You want company?”

Judging by Levon’s expression his offer wasn’t about keeping an eye on Tony, it was just a friendly question. He would take ‘no’ for an answer if Tony wanted to be alone with Ducky. Tony was increasingly glad Levon had come along.

Tony smiled. “I think you’d like Ducky.”

“He’s the older feller…the one with the long stories, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Can we get a cup o’ coffee before we go?” Levon grinned. “Don’t think my falling asleep on him would make for a very good impression.”

Tony chuckled. “Probably not.” Although knowing Ducky, the older man had experienced his audience drifting off at least once before.

“Call me when you’re done,” Levon said to Joe.

Joe gave him a two finger salute. “Will do, Cowboy.”

Tony wasn’t sure what to make of the look Gibbs gave him as he headed for the break room with Levon. He got the impression Gibbs might be trying to gauge if the conversation with Ziva had changed Tony’s mind about coming back to NCIS. There was a time when Gibbs would have known…or maybe it was just Tony’s belief that Gibbs knew everything that had him confessing to things or giving away his thoughts without the other man having to put forth much effort.

Like the first time he’d actually voiced any criticism of Gibbs, Tony winced as he realized Gibbs was some how less than he remembered. Even heroes have feet of clay, Tony thought with a mental grimace. And Gibbs had been his hero, his idol. He was someone Tony had looked up to and had emulated. Then Gibbs had run off to Mexico and things changed; the pedestal Tony had Gibbs on wasn’t nearly as lofty as it had once been. Tony wasn’t sure if that meant they were now on equal footing or not. He shook his head, deciding that it didn’t really matter.

Tony stepped into the break room, not surprised to find it empty. It usually was except around lunchtime. Tony poured a cup of coffee for Levon, offering it to the other man before pouring one for himself.

Levon gave the cup a dirty look after taking a sip. “People really like this shit?”

“No.” Tony laughed. “Mostly they drink it out of desperation.”
“It’s weaker than well water.” Levon eyed the half empty pot. “I could make—“

“I don’t think that would be a good idea, Cowboy.” The only one who liked Levon’s coffee was Levon. Well, Gibbs might like it, but Tony doubted anyone else could stand to drink it. The stuff currently available might be crap but at least it wasn’t strong enough to dissolve a spoon.

“We’ll get a cup of the real stuff later,” Tony offered when Levon still looked like he might be seriously considering actually brewing a new pot.

Levon sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

They headed down to the morgue. Until meeting Ducky, Tony had hated morgues and autopsies. Other coroners he’d worked with treated a body as little more than a carcass, as though they’d never been living, breathing people at all. Maybe the distance was necessary for them to do the job, but Tony never felt comfortable seeing a person stripped so completely of their humanity. And he really hated the idea that some day his remains might be treated the same way.

Ducky, on the other hand, managed to treat the dead as though they were still people. He was always respectful, even gentle. It went a long way toward making Tony more comfortable with the idea of corpses in general and autopsies in particular. It was decidedly reassuring to know the job could be done without the man doing it being callous or cold.

The pneumatic doors opened automatically for them. Ducky was at his desk having a cup of tea. Tony was glad they weren’t interrupting an autopsy. He didn’t really want to get in the way of a case or pull Ducky away from something important.

“Hey, Ducky.”

“Anthony!” Ducky immediately got up from his desk, his smile bright and welcoming. “So good to see you, my dear boy.”

He held out a hand, and Tony found himself taking it, using it to pull the older man into a hug. In all the time he’d worked at NCIS, he’d never hugged Ducky, but it felt right to do so now.

“It is good to see you too, Ducky,” Tony said, meaning every word. Ducky was the only one of his old teammates he’d stayed in touch with—albeit mostly via infrequent e-mails. The older man was the only one he thought might understand why he’d left, and didn’t judge him too harshly for it. He was the only one who thought Tony had done a decent job while Gibbs was in Mexico. He’d given Tony a stellar recommendation while staying quiet about where Tony had gone. Ducky at least thought Tony’s skill and ability as a detective were worth something, and was a good enough friend to respect his wishes. Ducky stepped back, blue eyes giving Tony a thorough once over. “You are looking well.”

“Thanks.” Tony grinned. “So are you.”
He waved Levon forward, patting him on the shoulder. “Ducky, this is my very good friend of mine, Levon Lundy. Levon, this is my good friend, Dr. Donald Mallard.”

“Dr. Mallard,” Levon held out his hand, “it’s a pleasure to meet you in person.”

“Video conferences might be convenient but they are no substitute for the real thing. And please call me Ducky, please, everyone does.” Ducky smiled, shaking Levon’s hand.

“Tony’s told me a lot about you.”

Ducky arched an eyebrow. “I can only hope he had nothing but good things to say.”

“Told me you were the best in the business.” Levon’s declaration was very matter of fact.

Tony chuckled when he saw a bit of color appear in Ducky’s cheeks. Who know he’d be embarrassed by an honest compliment?

Ducky’s smile turned shy. “A bit of an exaggeration, my good man.”

“If you can’t brag about your friends, who can you brag about?” Levon grinned.

“Quite right.” Ducky positively beamed, clearly pleased to be considered Tony’s friend. “Shall I tell you about some of Anthony’s exploits?”

Levon’s grin got wider, and Tony hung his head. “I should have known getting you to together would be a bad idea.”

“Don’t worry, Slick, he can’t have any more embarrassing stories about you than Joe’s got.”

“Wouldn’t bet on that,” Tony muttered. At least Joe knew better than to tell too much knowing full well Tony had stories of his own he could retaliate with. Tony didn’t have the same ammunition when it came to Ducky or Levon for that matter.

“Slick?” Ducky cocked his head, bright eyes inquisitive. “An odd nickname.”

“Not like Ducky is all that common,” Levon observed with a bemused smile.

“Yes, well, with my last name it rather makes sense.”

The next logical question would naturally be where Levon had come up with Tony’s nickname. It was one Tony wouldn’t mind getting a definitive answer to himself. He wasn’t entirely sure Levon would tell him the truth if he asked outright—the blond would more likely just tease him about it than tell him the truth. But if Ducky asked, the respect for his elders Levon’s grandmother had worked hard to instill in him might be
enough to get the real reason out of him, so Tony was hoping Ducky would ask.

Unfortunately, instead of focusing on Levon, the older man turned his attention back to Tony. “I’d love to hear about how you are doing in Houston, my boy. You’re e-mails have been rather brief. You’d mentioned your partner, but really told me little more than his name. And you never did tell me if you’d found a place of your own or how you made out in your quest for another classic car.”

There was no censure in Ducky’s voice, only honest curiosity. It was refreshing to have someone from his old team take an interest in his life as it was now rather than launch into trying convince him he should give it up and come back to NCIS.

“Perhaps that is too personal,” Ducky back-peddled, obviously reading more in Tony’s momentary hesitation than he’d intended. “It really is none of my—“

“I’m just trying to figure out where to start, Ducky.” Tony quickly reassured him. “There’s a lot of ground to cover. This might take awhile.”

“Oh, yes, I hadn’t thought of that.” Ducky shook his head. “Forgive me, I didn’t think you might be short on time.”

“Got plenty of time Ducky,” Tony smiled. He had no idea how long interrogating Jeanne would take. Fornell had told him not to leave town. It wasn’t like he had to be anywhere, and he missed talking to Ducky.

“I was thinking we might want to get more comfortable.”

Ducky chuckled. “Let me get another chair.”
Gibbs clenched his jaw, struggling to hold in his anger. While waiting for Fornell someone had made Director Shepard aware that Jeanne Benoit was in the building. Gibbs planned to find out just who that someone was and beat the crap out of him or her as soon as he had a chance, but right now he couldn’t mete out justice. The Director had taken it upon herself to question Dr. Benoit, and Gibbs had to watch to make sure Shepard didn’t railroad Tony into the electric chair.

He didn’t think she would, but he couldn’t be certain. That fact alone made Gibbs want to storm into the interrogation room and strangle Jenny for pulling this stupid stunt. It wouldn’t help the situation, but Gibbs was confident it would make him feel better.

Unfortunately, once she started questioning Benoit, it was better not to interrupt. Gibbs knew better than most how important it was to have control of the room and the stream of information; any break in the rhythm or flow would give the suspect a chance to recover his or her equilibrium. Storming in now would do more harm than good, especially when it looked like Shepard was trying to do exactly what Gibbs had planned to do—discredit Benoit’s statement.

Gibbs watched the younger woman’s face and body language carefully even has he glared daggers at the back of Shepard’s head. As much as he hated her right now, Gibbs had to admit Shepard knew how to approach the Benoit. She should, Gibbs thought with a mental snarl, Jenny knows all about plotting and scheming for revenge. She obviously could relate to what Benoit had felt for her father and how she felt about his death.

Glancing to his left, Gibbs noticed Fornell watching Shepard just as closely as he was. Fornell’s eyes were narrowed, his expression predatory. It didn’t really surprise Gibbs. This was Fornell’s case after all.

Despite his plans with Tony to keep the team safe from the fallout of Shepard’s actions, for just a moment, Gibbs seriously considered giving her to Fornell on a silver platter. If she had killed Rene Benoit, Shepard deserved to go down for murder. Gibbs sighed silently, unable to ignore the irony of his belief. He’d let Franks get away with murder and hadn’t given it a second thought. Hell, he’d killed the man who’d murdered his wife and daughter, lying in wait for to take him out with a long range sniper rifle. Gibbs knew he couldn’t lay claim to the moral high ground, but it still grated on his nerves that to save the rest of his team letting Shepard get away with it might well be necessary.

“Your father invited you to go with him, didn’t he?” Shepard asked. “He all but begged you. He wanted to keep you out of harm’s way.”

Gibbs kept his face impassive even though Shepard’s tone made him want to sneer. It was gentle, encouraging, even seductive. He could almost see Benoit starting to trust her, lulled by the compassion and sympathy Shepard projected.

“Yes. After Tony’s car blew up…Daddy thought it best to leave.” Benoit’s eyes were bright with unshed tears. “He was…we were going to head for the Bahamas. He wanted to take the yacht. He said it would be safer.”

“You didn’t want go with him, did you?” It was a rhetorical question. Shepard’s voice was confident,
knowing and full of understanding as she kept speaking, not giving Benoit time to answer. “You thought about it. You gave it serious consideration because he was your father and you loved him, in spite of everything. But there was too much you had to come to terms with. So much you hadn’t forgiven him for.”

Benoit opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked grief stricken and guilty at the same time.

“You were angry with him. Too angry to want to spend any time alone with him, afraid of what you might say.”

Benoit’s lower lip quivered. “There was so much he hadn’t told me. So much…He lied to me. For years!” Her voice was laced with anger and anguish in equal measure.

Benoit wiped away angrily at tears that had started to fall. “I became a doctor because I want to help people and he paid for my education with blood money. How many people are dead because of my father? How many died to pay for the things I took for granted? The house in Paris. His private plane. The cars and fine clothes. That goddamn yacht!”

“That yacht was going to take him to safety.” Shepard pointed out.

“It was.” Benoit confirmed Shepard’s assertion, her back straightening. “If it hadn’t been for Tony---.”

“How so?” Sheppard cocked her head to one side.

Gibbs gaze intensified. Finally they were getting somewhere. Next to him, LaFiamma tensed. Until then, Gibbs had forgotten the man was even in the room. Tony’s cousin reminded Gibbs of a big cat watching its prey, but Gibbs couldn’t tell who the man was assessing for a kill, Benoit or Shepard. For all Gibbs knew it could be both.

“Tony shot my father.”

Gibbs bit back a growl at her accusation. It was calmly delivered and her gaze never wavered. If not for the small tic in her cheek when she said it and his absolute faith that Tony hadn’t shot Rene Benoit, Gibbs would have found almost thought her credible.

“No, he didn’t.” Shepard countered.

“I was there!” Benoit protested hotly. “I know what I saw.”

“How could you see anything?” Shepard asked softly. “You never went to the marina.”

“Yes, I did.” Benoit insisted. “I was on the dock. It was raining. Tony and Daddy were on the deck—“

“Oh, you thought about going. I have no doubt about that.” Shepard assured her even as she cut Benoit off. “You were going to confront your father with your anger and his lies. You were going to demand he explain
it all to you. You wanted to know all about the life that he’d kept hidden from you for years. All those secrets and lies that brought Tony into your life and caused you even more pain. But at the last minute, you changed your mind. Didn’t you?”

Benoit looked away. Shepard leaned forward. “It’s understandable. You loved him for a long time. But you weren’t sure you were ready to hear everything he might have to say. What if it was worse than you imagined? What if he just kept lying to you? How would you know what was truth and what wasn’t? So you decided not to join him at the marina. You just needed some time maybe you could accept what you found out, come to terms with what you knew. If you gave it some time, maybe he could explain it to you when you were able to listen to what he had to say.”

“I needed time to think.” Benoit agreed. She sniffed, her hands shaking as she wiped away tears again. “There was just so much. The explosion….Daddy…Tony…it was raining…I was scared. I just wanted to run away and pretend none of this happened.”

“I know.” Shepard soothed. “It was a lot to take in.”

Benoit swallowed hard. “I thought I’d have more time.”

“We all think that.” Shepard sighed. “None of us ever has as much time as we want or need.”

Gibbs frowned. That wasn’t a lie from Shepard---even without seeing her face, Gibbs knew she wasn’t just sympathizing with Benoit. There was empathy; Shepard was speaking from personal experience.

What exactly did Shepard think she’d have more time for? She’d let La Grenouille go once when the CIA forced it, but she could have just as easily let Ziva shoot him in Canada. She obviously wasn’t intent on seeing the man brought to justice---so why not kill him at the first opportunity? What happened since then to make her feel the need to shoot him herself when she had? La Grenouille was on the run…one of his enemies could have taken him out, or his former allies at the CIA would have done the deed. Was Shepard just determined to do the deed herself before someone else beat her to it, or was there more to it than that?

Fornell’s interest was clearly piqued by Shepard’s statement as well. Gibbs wondered what the FBI agent made of it…if anything at all. LaFiamma’s focused expression remained unchanged. If anything struck him as odd about what Shepard had said, it didn’t show. He might be better at poker than Lundy thought.

“I should have had more time.” Benoit hissed, anger infusing her face with color, altering her good looks into something far less attractive. “If Tony hadn’t—“

“Your father was dealing in weapons before Tony was even born. He made dozens of enemies along the way.” Shepard’s tone went flat for a moment before once more becoming soft and encouraging. “That Tony pretended to be a film professor, rather than telling you he was a federal agent, whether or not his feelings for you were real or not, none of that fundamentally changes who or what your father was.”

Shepard sat back, head cocked slightly to one side. “And that’s really the issue isn’t it? Your father wasn’t who you thought he was, and you never got the chance to find out just what sort of man he truly was.”
“My father was a good man.” Benoît snapped back with righteous anger.

“So is Tony. He didn’t kill your father and you know it.” Shepard’s voice became insistent as she pushed harder. “You didn’t see him at the marina. You didn’t see him pull the trigger.”

Benoît was crying again. “He should have been there…he should have stopped it. Tony said he was trying to help. He said he thought there might be a chance for everything to work out. He said Daddy was in deep with the CIA. They wouldn’t let him get hurt.”

“Damn,” LaFiamma muttered. “She thinks Tony not saving the bastard is the same as if he’d pulled the trigger. Never would have guessed that was part of this equation.”

Gibbs bit back the urge to sigh heavily. He never seriously considered Benoît’s motive for accusing Tony of murder was anything but her being a ‘woman scorned’. Even after three divorces and several more failed relationships Gibbs was still surprised by how complex women could be.

“Tony wasn’t there, Jeanne, was he?”

Benoît shook her head.

“And neither were you.”

“No, I wasn’t there. I didn’t go to the marina.”

Shepard reached a hand across the table, taking Benoît’s. “There was nothing he could have done.”

“Tony should have been there. He should have kept him safe,” Benoît irrationally insisted, her shoulders hitching as she fought back a sob. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I should have been there.”

“That’s why you feel guilty, isn’t it?” Shepard asked. “You weren’t there with him.”

“My father died thinking I hated him and that I didn’t want to see him or speak to him ever again.” Benoît took a shaky breath. “I didn’t get to tell him I still loved him.”

“I’m sure he knew.” Shepard released Benoît’s hand.

Gibbs was certain Benoît had spent the last few months in Africa thinking about what to say to her father when she saw him. She had no idea he was dead, and that she’d never get the chance to deliver the carefully rehearsed speech she’d likely composed. It was no wonder the FBI contacting her about his death came as a surprise to her. Someone had to be blamed for the truth she never got to hear, for the explanations never made, for the opportunity lost. And like most people, Benoît opted to pass the buck and blamed the first person she thought of---a person who’d hurt her.

“My father was murdered.” Benoît’s chin came up. “I may not have seen it, but I know he would not have
committed suicide.”

“You might be right about that, but it wasn’t Tony DiNozzo who killed him.” Shepard stood up. “Accusing him of murder isn’t getting you any closer to finding the person responsible.”

Gibbs snorted. Technically, accusing Tony had gotten Benoit damned close to the person most likely to have killed her father. She just didn’t know it.

“You satisfied, Tobias?”

“Not even close.” Fornell grimaced, shaking his head. “All we know now is that she didn’t actually see anyone shoot her father because she wasn’t there.”

“Could have told you that from the start,” LaFiamma rolled his eyes. “But then I’m pretty sure you already knew that.”

Fornell smirked. He didn’t deny it. That made Gibbs want to smack him.

LaFiamma nodded toward where Benoit still sat. “You going to keep her around?”

Fornell’s eyebrows rose. “At least until we get an accurate statement, why?”

“I’d like you to hold her until Tony can speak with her.”

Fornell snorted. “I don’t arrange lovers’ trysts.”

“No, you just threaten to wrongfully imprison a man for a murder you never really thought he committed.” LaFiamma smiled tightly. “Hold her. You owe him that much.”

Fornell pursed his lips and looked like he might refuse on general principle. Gibbs had a feeling his old adversary hadn’t realized yet just how formidable Tony’s cousin could be. LaFiamma wasn’t someone who took no for an answer when it came to Tony’s well being. Lundy wouldn’t either.

“Tobias, just do it.” Gibbs shook his head.

Fornell looked at him, arching an eyebrow.

“Pick your battles.” Gibbs advised Fornell, smirking. “He can and will kick your ass.”

Physically, financially, intellectually—any or all—Gibbs was certain LaFiamma could do more than hold his own against the likes of Fornell and the FBI. And if LaFiamma couldn’t do it alone, Lundy would be there to back him up in spades. Gibbs couldn’t get a firm handle on that man, and he was sure Fornell wouldn’t be able to either. And God only knows who else might owe Lundy a favor that he could call in, Gibbs thought
with dark humor. It was a sure bet Lundy has someone in his pocket who could make Fornell’s life a living hell.

“We’ll keep her here for a couple of hours.” Fornell glared. “No more than that.”

“Don’t act like you are going out of your way.” LaFiamma gave Fornell a pointed look. “You’d have her here that long just to deal with the paperwork.”

“There won’t be any paperwork.”

“She led you on a wild goose chase.” LaFiamma snorted. “You might not charge her with obstruction of justice or falsifying a police report, but I doubt you’re going to just let her walk away from this without some sort of payback.”

Fornell smiled coldly. “I’m not that petty.”

“Yes, you are.” LaFiamma retorted; his smile little more than a baring of his teeth.

A knock at the door was a timely interruption Gibbs hadn’t expected and he found himself being torn between feeling grateful and annoyed. He and Fornell were friends…sort of. But at the moment, Gibbs felt more loyalty to LaFiamma even though he didn’t honestly like him. If Fornell and LaFiamma came to blows, Gibbs would be hard pressed to decided if he should step in or not, and on whose side. Still…there was some part of him that would have liked to have seen them take a swing at each other.

Shepard stepped into the room. She made eye contact with Gibbs before looking away. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of that, but he hadn’t felt confident in his ability to read her accurately since finding out about La Grenouille. And he could barely stand to be in the same room with her any more after Tony left NCIS.

Shepard frowned when she saw LaFiamma. His suit was obviously too expensive for a government employee, and with his jacket open it was hard to miss the shoulder harness he was wearing. Lawyers didn’t normally carry weapons. Unable to figure out exactly what LaFiamma was or why he was there, Gibbs could almost see Shepard opting to ignore him. He’d taught her better than that. A good agent never ignored anything that was such a clear contradiction and begged for an explanation.

Her focus shifted to Fornell. “You heard everything?”

“I did.”

“Good. Now maybe you can stop harassing my staff and anyone who used to work for me.”

“I don’t think so, Director.” Fornell shook his head. “All you managed to do was discredit Jeanne Benoit as a witness. We still have a murder to investigate.”

“Are you even sure it is murder?” Shepard arched an eyebrow.
It was a valid question. Without Jeanne Benoit’s statement, there was very little that indicated any foul play in Rene Benoit’s death. It wasn’t necessarily a homicide.

. Shepard smiled. “Despite what his daughter says, suicide is still a possibility.”

“Until I know definitively one way or another, we’ll continue to treat this as a murder investigation.”

Which is how it should be treated, Gibbs thought grimly. Why the FBI hadn’t done that initially was the real question. They’d been lazy and sloppy. They were trying to make up for it now. Franks had told him once, ‘Sloppy people never enough time to do it right but always plenty of time to do it over’.

Shepard’s eyes narrowed, measuring Fornell. “I’d rather you didn’t keep playing games with my staff--.”

“Then maybe you should have told me DiNozzo quit months ago.”

Shepard shrugged. “You didn’t ask.”

“You deliberately withheld—“

“No, I did not.” Shepard’s spine stiffened. “I gave you everything you requested, Special Agent Fornell. You weren’t exactly clear as to who or what you were investigating until today. I’m not a mind reader.”

Fornell snorted. “Like Gibbs hadn’t already told you.”

Shepard’s eyes flickered toward Gibbs. It was surprisingly easy to read the betrayal she felt before it was masked. He stared back at her unapologetic.

Gibbs hadn’t mentioned Fornell stopping by his place, what the FBI was after or what he’d put his team to work on. He hadn’t even told her he was going to Houston to get Tony. He didn’t feel bad about it either. She interfered with his team, and even if by some slim chance she hadn’t killed Rene Benoit, she had put them all in an awkward position with her obsession. Everyone in the agency was at risk of facing serious consequences over her actions. But more importantly to Gibbs, she’d been the final straw that forced Tony into leaving.

“Gibbs didn’t tell me anything,” Shepard said softly, her focus once more on Fornell. “It appears I’m more out of the loop than I thought.”

“Then maybe you and I need to have a more detailed conversation.”

It was obviously not a suggestion. Shepard glared at Fornell. “My office.”

“I’m thinking another interrogation room would be better.”
Her chin came up. “Am I suspect?”

“Yes, Ma’am, you are.”

Fornell’s blunt answer surprised Gibbs. He expected him to play it out a little longer. He heard LaFiamma mutter what sounded like ‘about damn time’.

Fornell’s expression was mild, but his tone was implacable. “I’ve got a few questions you need to answer.”

Shepard pursed her lips obviously annoyed. She had sense enough not to argue. “Fine.”

“I don’t need to tell you to stay out of the observation room, do I, Jethro?” Fornell gave Gibbs a pointed look. “I’ll want to talk to you too at some point.”

Gibbs resisted the urge to roll his eyes, nodding as he left the room. LaFiamma followed silently behind. Neither of them even gave Sacks, who was standing near the door, a second look.

Fornell’s warning was unnecessary. Gibbs couldn’t be an alibi for Shepard and he didn’t need one for himself. The security cameras at NCIS documented his every move on the day La Grenouille had likely died and for several days afterwards. And what wasn’t recorded, his team was with him---with the exception of Tony.

But he understood why Fornell felt compelled to make the point. The potential existed for anyone working for Shepard to be considered a suspect. It wasn’t a huge stretch for someone looking in from the outside to claim an agent could have taken out Rene Benoit on Shepard’s orders, or had done it out of some misplaced loyalty. As far-fetched and stupid as Gibbs thought such a theory was, it would nicely explain how Shepard’s gun came to be used. The agents most likely to be considered were those known to be involved---Gibbs’ team.

Fornell had already held Abby for several hours for questioning. He would have done the same with McGee, Ziva and Ducky if they hadn’t managed to be unavailable long enough to hack into the FBI’s files and review the case with Lundy and his team. The distraction with Tony’s return, and then Jeanne Benoit had given them more time to work.

Had Tony been around, and it was business as usual, Fornell could have easily isolated the team and questioned them one by one. Gibbs was confident Fornell had already dispatched a team to Tony’s old apartment before he’d come by Gibbs’ place. Tony’s absence had thrown Fornell off his game long enough for Gibbs to get to the others and get them working on the case while he headed for Houston.

If they’d been in custody, with Tony the prime suspect, Gibbs and his team would have reacted very differently to the threat Fornell posed. They would probably have focused more on finding out who had killed La Grenouille as a way of saving one of their own---essentially doing Fornell’s job for him. But Lundy and his team had taken a different approach, focusing on the evidence and weaknesses of the case, using that to cast doubt on Benoit’s accusation. And while it hadn’t been Gibbs who’d hammered the final nail in, Shepard had done exactly what he’d planned to accomplish.
Gibbs stopped and turned to look at LaFiamma. LaFiamma already had his cellphone in his hand.

“You calling Lundy?”

“Yes.” LaFiamma held the phone up to his ear. “We should run the numbers again.”

Gibbs now understood what the Houston cop meant by that phrase. He wanted to go over the case again and assess what they knew in a systematic way. Gibbs nodded. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to summarize what they’d accomplished, and what still needed to be done.

McGee had better have found Kort. It was looking like they were definitely going to need him to get everyone out of this cluster. The FBI wasn’t going to drop the case without definitive proof as to what happened to Rene Benoit. Fornell could be every bit as tenacious as Gibbs when he wanted to be.

“Yeah, we’re done…Yes…No…Better I fill you in face to face.” LaFiamma’s lips curled upward in a wry smile. “Something like that.” He chuckled over whatever Lundy said before nodding once. “We’ll meet you there.”

LaFiamma closed his phone and returned it to the clip on his belt. “They want to meet up in Abby’s lab. I’m assuming you know the way.”

Gibbs nodded. “We’ll get Ziva along the way.”

“I figured as much.” LaFiamma waved a hand. “After you.”

Gibbs resisted the urge to belt him one. He simply strode purposefully down the hall toward the bullpen. If he could get things moving the right way soon enough, he should have time to get Ziva and Ducky alone to find out how their conversations with Tony went. Resolving the case wasn’t the only thing Gibbs hoped to accomplish today.
When Levon’s cell rang it took Tony by surprise. He’d been so immersed in catching up with Ducky he’d actually forgotten his fate was being decided in an interrogation room upstairs.

“You guys finished?” Levon nodded in response to Joe’s answer. He then asked if they’d been able to get Jeanne to admit she’d lied. He gave Tony a thumbs up.

Tony let out the breath he’d been holding. Not that he’d ever actually doubted Gibbs, but there was always the possibility Jeanne would stick to her story. Tony would never have expected her to accuse him of murder in the first place---so he wasn’t sure he could accurately assess what sort of fortitude she might bring to bear when squaring off against Gibbs.

“Are we clear to leave?” Levon asked.

If the answer was yes, then the FBI had dropped the case. Tony didn’t plan to leave right away in that event. He still wanted a chance to talk to Abby and McGee, but it would be nice to have the case closed and not have to worry about it any more. If Joe’s answer was ‘no’ then only Jeanne’s statement as a witness had been discredited and the FBI was still looking at Rene Benoit’s death as a murder.

Levon’s brown eyes met Tony’s. He shook his head. Tony sighed. It was too much to hope for that Fornell would just drop it.

“We need to talk about the case and strategize a bit more.” He tilted his cell phone away from his mouth to address Tony directly. “There some place we can meet up to run through the numbers again?”

“I’d suggest Abby’s lab,” Ducky said before Tony could respond. “She can ensure privacy.”

Tony nodded in agreement. Abby’s lab only had two security cameras, and it wouldn’t take much for her to block them or shut them off completely if need be.

“Got a consensus here to meet up in Abby’s lab. No idea where that is but I’m sure Tony does. Guessing Gibbs can get you there if you haven’t already beaten him unconscious and found somewhere to dump the body.” Levon grinned. “See you soon.”

Levon snapped his phone shut and returned it to his belt clip. “Okay, kid, let’s go do this thing.”

As they headed for the door, Levon turned back to look at Ducky. “You’re coming too, aren’t you Ducky?”

“I’d love to.” Ducky smiled broadly, bright and eager, clearly delighted to be included. “I have missed your campfires, my boy,” he said patting Tony on the shoulder.

Tony ducked his head shyly, pleased to know not everyone had hated the one major change he’d made as acting team leader. He’d modeled his campfires after things Joe had talked about working for his unit in
Houston. At the time, Tony had simply thought the campfires would expedite sharing information and exploring theories of the crime being investigated.

Until he started including them directly, Tony hadn’t realized how isolated Duck and Abby had been from the team’s collective thought process. He hadn’t understood how they might have felt about not being fully included in each development of the case either. Under Gibbs it was far more common that the contributions of the ancillary team members would only be made known to them while Gibbs or another team member was in the morgue or the lab. Ducky and Abby often wouldn’t know until the reports were written the actual details on the case’s resolution.

“I don’t understand why Gibbs wouldn’t keep something that worked,” Levon commented as they stepped into the elevator.

“Gibbs prefers to do things his own way.” Ducky shrugged.

“In other words he’s either stubborn, stupid or a bit of both.”

“He can be.” Ducky chuckled. “Having known him so long, I must admit that in spite of his somewhat contrary nature I do believe him to be a good and honorable man.”

“Figure you are right about that.” Levon smiled.

Tony knew if Levon hadn’t thought Gibbs was on the up and up, he’d have never insisted Tony talk to him or invited Gibbs to fly on Ezra’s plane with them. That wasn’t to say Levon actually liked Gibbs. He just didn’t think him as much a shithead as Joe did. But then Joe tended to regard slights to his family as nearly unforgivable—especially when Tony was the only blood relative he could still freely interact with or rely on.

The music escaping from Abby’s lab wasn’t her usual noise—pounding drums, screaming guitars and shouted lyrics. It was jazz. The sort Tony liked to listen to when he was relaxing at home. Joe had introduced him to it when he’d lived with Tony not long after quitting law school. It had been a favorite ever since.

Tony cocked his head to one side, eying the closed door with suspicion. Not only was the music wrong, Abby rarely closed the door. Maybe they’d moved Abby’s lab to another part of the building; had finally given her the added space and updated her equipment she was always begging for. It would be the sort of reward she deserved.

“Ducky, did they move—“

“Oh, no, my boy, it is still Abby’s lab.” Ducky smiled. “She’s taken to keeping the door closed only since this latest upheaval.”

“But the music isn’t her usual stuff.” Tony shook his head, more than a little dumbfounded. “It’s like night and day—“
“I know.” Ducky’s smile faded a little. “She’s been playing your musical preferences since you left. Something of an homage to you, I believe.”

“Seriously?” Tony’s mouth dropped open. “She’s been playing Jazz since I left?”

“Yes.”

Gibbs said he had been missed. Ziva had echoed that sentiment, but this was far more than just words. This was a length Tony never would have expected Abby to go to. He wasn’t Gibbs, so Tony hadn’t thought his absence would have warranted the same sort of obvious, grand display from her.

“I should warn you now, she has pictures of you posted on the wall.”

Tony nodded, unsurprised. Gibbs had mentioned that when they’d talked in Houston. “Gibbs said she had a few—”

“Not a few dear boy, hundreds.”

“She some kind of stalker?” Levon asked, wary brown eyes giving the innocuous closed door a suspicious glance.

Levon and Joe had dealt with a stalker once before. It was a young woman who’d been so fascinated with Joe at one point she’d threatened to kill anyone that stood between them. Levon was at the top of her hit list. She had taken a shot at him, her aim good enough to give him a bullet burn across his upper arm before Joe and Legs had taken her down with a shot to the chest and one to the head. Joe and Levon both had good reason to be uneasy when it came to dealing with obsessive types.

“Oh, no, not like that,” Ducky assured Levon before Tony could. “Abigail is just…well, she’s rather a free spirit and very expressive with her emotions.”

“Abby wears her heart on her sleeve, Levon.” Tony said, torn between being pleased by her having displayed so much unhappiness at his being gone and sorrow for having caused her any pain at all. “She’s not dangerous, Cowboy.”

Ducky smiled, trying to further reassure at Levon. “The pictures are a tribute, not a shrine. But to see so many photos of oneself on display can be a bit, well, off putting. I thought a little forewarning for Anthony might be prudent.”

Levon nodded, but Tony could tell he was reserving the right to make his own call on whether or not Abby might be dangerous. Tony understood. It wasn’t like Levon really knew Abby. It was enough that Levon was prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt on just his and Ducky’s say so.

Tony turned the doorknob, frowning when it didn’t give. He looked over his shoulder at Ducky. “She never used to lock the door.”
“She still doesn’t most of the time, but with the FBI in the building asking questions and naming you as a prime suspect—“

“Better safe than sorry,” Tony nodded. He knocked on the door, rapping out the rhythm to ‘shave and a hair cut, two bits’ with a grin. He’d teased Abby once about a ‘secret knock’ but never thought they’d actually need one.

The music was abruptly silenced. Tony grinned, knocking again, whistling the ‘two bits’ part. He was still grinning when Abby opened the door. “I don’t know the password, so don’t even ask me.”

She laughed, pulling him in to the lab. “I couldn’t come up with a good password,” she said with a grin of her own. “I am never good at that sort of thing. At least not when I’m flying solo.”

It was a moment of déjà vu for Tony. Abby had often been his coconspirator in silly, off the wall shit that made sense to only the two of them. No one in Houston played with him quite the same way. He’d missed it.

Glancing around, Tony quickly noted the abundance of pictures of himself Ducky had warned him about. In spite of Ducky’s warning, he hadn’t imagined quite so many. Shots of him covered most of one wall, and he found himself wondering where she’d gotten them all. He didn’t notice any duplicates. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the number he saw repeated on yellow sticky notes affixed to every machine in the lab until he remembered Gibbs saying Abby had counted the days he was gone.

Rather than dwell on how uneasy it made him feel that she had so many candid shots he hadn’t even been aware were taken, and that she’d actually counted the days, Tony looked away. His eyes quickly found McGee and Ziva. They were standing near Abby’s computer.

Tony smiled at Ziva, pleased to get a smile from her in return. It felt natural. It was almost the way things had been before he’d left.

McGee nodded to Tony, stuttering out a greeting. Tony nodded back, trying to put the other man at ease. The stutter reminded Tony of how McGee had acted around Gibbs when he first joined the team. He was so afraid of making a mistake he was nearly paralyzed, unable to stay or do anything with much confidence. Tony wasn’t quite sure why McGee should be nervous around him—maybe if he got a chance to speak to him alone McGee could explain it.

There was another knock at the door. It was perfunctory, demanding. Tony smirked. “Wanna bet that’s Gibbs?”

Ziva rolled her eyes. Abby grinned. McGee just shook his head.

Levon snickered. “No takers, Slick.”

“A better bet would be to see how long it would take him to loose patience and pick the lock,” Ducky offered, blue eyes sparkling with mischief behind his glasses.
“Abby! Open the damn door.”

“Right away, my Silver Fox.” Abby moved quickly to unlock the door.

Tony laughed silently, amazed at the lack of what used to be his knee jerk reaction in the face of Gibbs’ anger. He could see McGee fidget. Ziva’s expression sobered and her focus sharpened. Even Ducky hid his humor, his shoulders squaring as his posture stiffened into something almost formal. Only Abby was completely relaxed, but then she’d never had reason to fear Gibbs’ wrath.

Tony didn’t need fear Gibbs’ wrath either. He wasn’t answerable to him any longer. He’d known that since he left for Houston, but it was something that really resonated for Tony in the place where making Gibbs happy had once been his main objective.

Tony certainly hadn’t missed the intimidation factor. His current team set high standards but not unrealistic ones, and they didn’t just answer to Beaumont—they answered to one another. There was no dominant, father figure treating them like naughty children for joking with each other. Their goofing off was just part of their day to day interactions and never got out of hand. Tony the restraint they showed was in large part because they were on equal footing, and took responsibility for not just themselves but the team as a whole.

Gibbs strode into the room, Joe following only a pace behind. Tony made eye contact with his cousin, gauging his mood and trying to get a feel for how things had gone upstairs. Joe gave him a quick smile but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Tony already knew things hadn’t gone as smoothly as he hoped just from what Joe had relayed to Levon over the phone, but it didn’t hurt to have it confirmed.

“McGee what have you got on Kort?”

McGee almost looked guilty. “I know you said to find him and bring him here, but just locating him took longer than we---”

Gibbs waved an impatient hand. “Where is he, Mc—“

“All more interested in what you’ve got to tell us,” Levon said, neatly cutting off Gibbs.

Gibbs glared at Levon. Levon simply stared back, crossing his arms over his chest as he canted one hip to lean against Abby’s lab table. “Reason we’re having this little pow wow is because of what happened upstairs. And since y’all are the only ones who know what happened, I’m thinking we should start with that.”

Not giving Gibbs a chance to argue, Joe began to fill them in. He ignored the dark look Gibbs gave him with practiced ease. Tony hid a smile. Joe and Levon had a habit of tag teaming people. At some point Gibbs might just catch on that to deal with one, he was going to have to deal with both.

When Joe said it was Shepard who interrogated Jeanne Tony wasn’t entirely surprised. He couldn’t see the Director from staying out of the case—not when her future rested on the outcome.
He supposed he should be grateful Shepard had managed to get Jeanne to admit her statement about seeing Tony kill her father was a lie. He just couldn’t muster anything other than distrust. If not for Shepard, Tony wouldn’t have been involved with Jeanne in the first place, and he was sure Shepard getting Jeanne to admit she lied wasn’t really about Tony at all. It was far more likely she’d assumed that discrediting Jeanne’s statement would be enough to end the FBI’s investigation. Ending the inquiry into how Rene Benoit died was far more likely Shepard’s number one priority than clearing Tony’s name.

Hearing Jeanne’s motives for lying hurt. Tony hadn’t realized she expected him to keep her father safe. He’d tried, damn it. It wasn’t his fault that Shepard refused to give Rene sanctuary or that the CIA wasn’t willing to let him quit. It wasn’t like he’d told Rene to run. After being in the weapons business for longer than Tony had been alive the man should have known better than to try and flee by such an obvious means. Trying to take his own yacht was about as subtle as a sledgehammer. Looking back on it, Tony realized Rene’s choice showed how off his game he was, how scared he might have been with both his life and his daughter’s on the line.

“Surprised Fornell let Shepard in the room.” Levon rubbed his chin thoughtfully after Joe finished speaking.

“Not sure he could have stopped her,” Gibbs snorted. “She’s one determined woman.”

Levon shook his head. “Her being a prime suspect—“

“The Director?” McGee gaped at Levon. Tony had forgotten that his old team had only reviewed the case in terms of how valid Jeanne’s statement was. They hadn’t looked at all the evidence the way he, Joe, Levon and even Gibbs had. Although, McGee’s been an investigator long enough, Tony thought, he should have caught it.

“You can’t seriously think—“

“It was her gun, McGee,” Ziva said softly, dark eyes revealing a wealth of emotions absent from her voice.

Tony suddenly felt sorry for her. Ziva had been in the dark as much as the rest of the team about La Grenouille and Shepard’s obsession. That Shepard hadn’t confided in her, asked for her help or input, made it clear that their friendship wasn’t as strong or deep as Ziva likely had believed. Tony’s more practical side couldn’t help thinking that it was really only fair—Ziva probably hadn’t used Shepard as her main confidant either. There were too damn many secrets between the two women for them to ever really be friends on anything more than a superficial level. What amazed Tony was Ziva’s failure to see it until now. Once her loyalty had shifted to Gibbs, Ziva was of less use to Shepard, the same way Tony only became useful to Shepard when his loyalty shifted away from Gibbs.

“Fornell is after Jenny?” Abby asked, sounding just as incredulous as she looked.

“I suspected there might be more to this than met the eye,” Ducky stated quietly. Ducky always was a sharp one. Tony had enjoyed having his insight and observations during their campfires. He would have liked to have had them in Houston.
“Tony was nothing but a red herring,” Levon confirmed, nodding to Ducky. “They had to investigate him because of Jeanne’s statement, but none of the evidence they’ve got really points to him. It’s far more likely they were using her statement as a way to gain complete access to NCIS and the Director.” He frowned. “You guys know that right?”

Joe spoke up before they could even answer what he clearly assumed was a rhetorical question from his partner. “Fornell didn’t just let Shepard do the interrogation.” Joe grimaced, shaking his head. “He made sure she knew Jeanne was in the building. No way was that an accident. I should have seen it sooner.”

Gibbs frowned. “Why would Fornell—“

“Because you would have just focused on getting Jeanne to recant her statement. And what Fornell really wanted was for Shepard to let something slip that he could use to nail her ass.”

Joe sighed, blue eyes meeting blue. “The man played you…probably from the beginning. He played all of us.”

“Son of a bitch,” Gibbs growled quietly.

“Yep.” Levon’s grin was tight and hard and had little to do with humor. “Bastard is smarter than I gave him credit for.”

Tony knew underestimating Fornell was not a mistake Levon or Joe would make a second time. It wasn’t one he’d make more than once either. He’d forgotten that Fornell might not be as skilled as an investigator as Gibbs, but the man was no slouch. He wouldn’t have risen through the FBI ranks if he was. And going after the head of a federal agency was a make or break a career sort of move---it wasn’t one someone like Fornell would take lightly.

“We’re going to need plan B, aren’t we?” Tony asked. The question was mostly rhetorical. For Gibbs to have asked McGee about Kort when he first entered Abby’s lab, he was already expecting to put Plan B into action.

“Plan B? What is Plan B?” Ziva asked, eyes darting from Tony to Gibbs. McGee was doing the same thing, looking both curious and suspicious. Abby seemed pensive, her hands twisting around each other as she nearly bounced in place on her toes. Ducky looked smug and it wouldn’t surprise Tony in the least that he suspected there was a back up plan all along.

Plan B was what Joe and Levon referred to the backup plan Tony and Gibbs had formulated for rescuing the team from Shepard’s quagmire. He’d hoped it wouldn’t be needed, but hadn’t really believed all he’d have to do in DC would be clear his name and everything would be okay. He’d have never even considered Plan B in that case or expected Gibbs to put it motion while letting Fornell interrogate him.

“McGee where is Trent Kort?” Gibbs asked, ignoring Ziva’s question.
“It took a bit of doing, but Abby and I hacked into and decoded—“ he cleared his throat, looking sheepish when Gibbs glared at him. “Right…You don’t really need to know the details.” McGee straightened his spine. “According to his last check in with his CIA controller, he’s staying at a hotel La Grenouille used to frequent when he stayed in DC, The Carlton. He’s in the penthouse suite.”

“Guessing that’s not on the government’s dime,” Levon observed dryly.

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” Joe countered, “just not any account the rest of us should know about.”

“We even got a cellphone number for him,” Abby beamed, spinning toward her computer and typing with her usual speed. “I’m not sure how long he’ll have this one since I’m guessing super secret spy types ditch phones about as often as I do Caf-Pow cups, but the GPS feature confirms he’s still at the hotel.” She quickly wrote down the address, room and cell phone number, handing it to Gibbs.

“Good work, Abbs.” Gibbs gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Ziva, you’re with me. McGee get me everything there is to know on Kort.”

Tony sighed, shaking his head as he watched Gibbs and Ziva leave. He muttered to himself, “Nice to know some things never change.”

Ducky gave him a rueful smile, patting Tony’s shoulder. “He is rather consistent if not always predictable.”

Tony chuckled. “That’s one way to put it, Ducky.”

“I’m not sure I’m of much assistance at this point, so I’ll leave you to figure this out. Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. I have some paperwork I’ve put off for far too long, but I’m sure it could wait a little longer if the need should arise.” Ducky held out a hand to Levon. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Levon grinned and shook Ducky’s hand. “Might just have to make time for a few more stories once all this is put to bed.”

Ducky laughed. “I’d be delighted.”

It wasn’t until after Ducky left that Tony realized he hadn’t actually introduced him to Joe. Hopefully he’d get a chance to correct that oversight later.

McGee shifting his weight drew Tony’s attention to him. McGee’s expression was uncertain. He looked at Tony, and then looked away eyeing Joe and Levon warily. It was obvious he had something he wanted to speak with Tony, but he didn’t want an audience to do it. Abby looked just as anxious, and seemed to be holding herself in a state of readiness—like she wanted to hug Tony again or start talking at a mile a minute but was restraining herself by force of will alone. Tony idly wondered if she’d pounce on him like an oversized house cat if he suddenly made a break for the door.

Both Joe and Levon gave him quizzical glances. They’d picked up on the same silent cues as Tony and were mutely asking what he wanted them to do.
“Could you guys give me a few minutes?” Tony smiled. “I’d like to talk to McGee and Abby.”

“We’ll just wait in the hall.” Joe’s gaze shifted, eyes narrowing as he took in the pictures of Tony on the wall. Tony recognized the subtle hand movements as Joe checked his weapons. “Keep the door unlocked.”

The small admonishment didn’t faze Tony at all. He already knew how protective Joe could be and that he’d likely draw a similar conclusion to what Levon had earlier when he’d heard about the pictures.

Abby shot Joe an outraged look, not at all pleased by Joe’s insinuation they weren’t to be trusted. “We’re not dangerous to Tony, you know? We love him.”

“Can’t really say much for how you’ve shown it.” Joe looked back at her, a clear challenge in his eyes. “Giving him all those reasons to leave, oh yeah, sister, that’s love all right.”

Abby flushed. Her eyes took on a sheen Tony knew could be either anger or tears. He actually hoped for the former. He hated it when Abby cried. McGee looked ready to defend her---Tony was fairly confident he had no idea what he’d be taking on if he tried to put Joe in his place.

“Joe.” Levon’s tone was mild, but there was no mistaking the reprimand. Abby hadn’t done anything to deserve his being nasty…well, not really. Tony was glad Levon could and would rein Joe in so easily. At this point he was the best one suited for the job.

Joe didn’t apologize, but he didn’t press any more either. Tony thought that would be about as good as it got. Fortunately, Levon was willing to smoothing things over.

“Don’t mind him, ma’am,” Levon said to Abby, his drawl more pronounced than it had been. “Joe doesn’t always use the manners I know he’s got. He’s a good guy once you get to know him.” Levon dipped his head to Abby in a small bow, touching the brim of his Stetson.

Tony hid a smile when Abby warmed noticeably to Levon. McGee relaxed simply because Abby had. Sometimes those good old boy mannerisms and attitudes came in handy.

Levon saluted Tony with two fingers. “We’ll be outside. Just sing out if you need us.”

“Will do, Cowboy.”
McGee watched Lundy and LaFiamma leave Abby’s lab. He breathed a silent sigh of relief. He hadn’t been entirely sure they’d agree to giving him and Abby time alone with Tony. And he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted them to.

McGee bit his lower lip, hands twitching aimlessly. He didn’t know exactly why Tony had left. He suspected, but he was pretty sure everyone on the team had their suspicions about why Tony quit. Whatever it was, McGee didn’t think he was solely responsible. The entire team had a hand in Tony’s resignation, of that McGee was fairly certain. But what worried McGee was that he might have been the final straw. And now that Tony was back, McGee was genuinely afraid he’d say or do the wrong thing, once more driving him away.

He, Ziva and Abby all agreed they wanted Tony to stay. They’d talked about how nothing was the same without him for hours, more open and honest with one another than they’d been before while waiting for Gibbs to return with Tony in tow. McGee desperately didn’t want to be the one who screwed up what might be their only shot at getting Tony to return to NCIS.

“Relax, will you, Tim.” Tony said.

McGee blinked at hearing his first name. Tony had rarely, almost never in fact, used his first name. It sounded wrong. The same way Tony using his surname had sounded wrong that morning when he arrived in the bullpen. It should have been “McGeek” or “McGoo” or “Probie.” He almost said as much, but was afraid of how stupid he’d sound asking Tony to make fun of him. But, damn it, he missed Tony’s teasing, only realizing after Tony had left how much acceptance and genuine affection it had shown.

“Why are you so nervous anyway?” Tony arched an eyebrow. “You know I don’t bite.” A quicksilver smile appeared, directed at Abby. “Unless, of course, you want me to. I’m always willing to accommodate a lovely lady.”

Abby grinned and winked, clearly enjoying his flirting. She always had, McGee thought with a mental sigh. He’d envied Tony’s easy ability to interact with Abby---with women in general. McGee had never quite figured out how to really flirt harmlessly. He spent more time trying to make a meaningful connection than just being playful with other people.

Ironically, Tony often made the very connections McGee wanted with seemingly little effort. All it appeared to take was a ready smile and willingness to play the fool now and again. Not that Tony was a fool---although, it had taken his leaving for McGee to really appreciate the difference between acting like a fool and being one. McGee smiled wryly to himself, shaking his head. He had missed Tony’s lighthearted demeanor, banter and quick wit even more than he had the teasing.

Abby bounced forward to hug Tony. McGee wished he could hug Tony too, but it wasn’t like they’d ever hugged before Tony left and it wasn’t exactly a manly sort of thing to do. Not to mention Tony would probably belt him one.

“Need to breathe, Abby,” Tony gasped out.
“Oh, right, sorry.” Abby let go. She smiled up at him. “I missed you.”

Tony’s eyes went to the pictures on the wall. “I can tell.”

McGee winced. If he didn’t know Abby, he’d think she had real potential to be what Tony would call ‘a psycho stalker chick’. That LaFiamma had seemed to think so didn’t come as a surprise to McGee, not really, but he was insulted on Abby’s behalf. She was too good a person to be judged and dismissed so quickly.

Abby looked at her wall of photos, grinning brightly before the pride in her display faded abruptly. McGee knew she was seeing the wall the way LaFiamma must have. She looked at Tony uncertainly. “Too much?”

“Just a bit.” Tony smiled gently. “One or two would have been enough.”

“But I had Gibbs’ picture up everywhere, well, not everywhere, but close enough, and I know it hurt you. I mean, I didn’t know at the time. I swear I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to be cruel. Honest, Tony. I wouldn’t do that to you. And when you left, I thought I should at least give you as much face time as I did Gibbs, even more to make up for what I did. It wasn’t fair before, I know that now, so I was just—”

“I know, Abby, I know.” Tony raised a hand to put a finger to her lips halting the rapid flow of words. “I appreciate the gesture, but this sort of…display isn’t really necessary.”

She pulled back from his touch. “I wanted you to know how much I love you.”

“You could have told me that when I was here.”

Tony’s tone wasn’t accusatory or even hostile, but Abby flinched just the same. McGee nearly did as well. That was really the crux of the issue---they’d taken him for granted, never realizing what he added to the team and their lives until he wasn’t there.

McGee made the mistake of thinking he knew Tony—and he was sure the others had made the same error. They only learned the really important things about Tony after he left. Things he had family he could and would go to. That he was far more ready and able to run, hiding without any real effort from their usual means of locating someone on the lam. That he was more important to the team than any of them realized.

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Abby blinked rapidly, overly bright eyes nearly brimming over. Her lower lip quivered as she took a shuddering breath. “I really am.”

“Hey, hey, none of that now.” Tony pulled her into a gentle hug. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” She was crying openly now. “You didn’t call. You didn’t write. You didn’t even leave me a number. You have to be so angry with me.” She hiccupped. “Please don’t hate me—“

“Shhh.” He placed a kiss in her hair, then rested his chin on her head. He rocked her back and forth, clearly
trying to calm Abby down. “I don’t hate you. I could never hate you. And I’m not mad at you, Abby.”

“You were mad and you left us.” Abby nearly wailed, and McGee felt like echoing that sentiment.

Anger had been the best motive McGee thought made sense for Tony leaving. Looking back on it they’d all given him plenty of reason to be pissed. Maybe what Tony meant when he told Abby he wasn’t mad at her was that he wasn’t mad any more.

Disappointment ranked high on the list as well. Although, it wasn’t one McGee really wanted to dwell on. Anger could be exorcised, expunged. If need be, Tony could belt him one---maybe even lay out Gibbs and Ziva while he was at it---and things would be good again. McGee didn’t quite know how one got rid of disappointment.

Hurt was on the list as possible contender for why Tony had left. They hadn’t been terribly supportive of Tony when he’d been acting team leader---insulting and dismissive were the only words McGee could think to apply to how they acted. It wasn’t right, nor had it been fair. Tony had held them together, and they hadn’t appreciate how much he did for them.

The same thing could be said of how they’d acted after the whole La Grenouille case came to light. They were pissy and petty. It didn’t speak well of them, and just thinking about their behavior made McGee flush with shame.

None of them knew Tony had been pulling double duty---but even without knowing they should have at least thought to ask why he wasn’t around or where he went or why he was tired so often. They could have been more understanding about the need for secrecy. It wasn’t Tony’s fault they were in the dark. They never blamed the person responsible, Shepard.

They didn’t give Tony any support in the aftermath. If anything they were even less helpful. Gibbs dismissed Tony obvious heartbreak and loss as of no consequence. Ziva managed to insult Tony somehow in the men’s room, forcing him to apologize for whatever the hell she’d done or said. And McGee hadn’t fully believed Tony was ever in love with Jeanne in the first place much less truly upset.

McGee hadn’t been at all considerate or compassionate on the Chimera when he knew Tony had better reason than most to fear biological weapons. He didn’t give Tony any credit for figuring out how their real life ‘Eraser’ worked, or for realizing it had been Arnett’s wife who killed him. He hadn’t even thought to ask if Tony was okay after leaping into frigid water to save Gibbs. No one else had either, at least not that McGee knew of.

“It’s okay, Abby. Really.” Tony said softly, drawing McGee out of his thoughts and back to what was going on in front of him. Abby had stopped crying. Her make up was smudged and she looked raccoon with black rings around her eyes. Dark streaks making a slow downward slide over her cheeks added to Abby’s overall bedraggled appearance.

Tony placed a single finger under her chin, tilting her face upward. “You might want to go wash you face, honey.”
“Bad?”

Tony chuckled. “You aren’t wearing water proof mascara, Abbs. And I think your eyeliner might have decided to go along for the ride.”

“Oh God. I ran out of my usual brand and I didn’t have time to get more so I just picked up whatever was handy. I never even checked the label. I usually do because I don’t want anything they tested on animals and---.” Abby winced, abruptly halting her babble. “Right. You don’t need to know that. Just give me a minute.”

Tony smiled indulgently. “Take your time.”

Abby headed for her glassed in office. McGee knew she kept baby wipes, cold cream and a wash cloth in her desk. She often used them to remove her makeup when working late. Although, he was never clear on why she took it off when she’d only reapply it again. Some things women did were always a mystery to him, and he was frankly happy to leave it that way.

McGee cleared his throat, more nervous now that he was alone with Tony than he’d been before. Tony cocked his head, green eyes assessing him openly.

“Something you want to say, Tim?”

Again with his first name. McGee nearly scowled, but forced himself not to. He didn’t want Tony reading anything into his expression.

“I know I was part of the reason you left.” McGee squared his shoulders. He could own up to his mistakes, be a man about his own short comings.

“You were.” Tony nodded slowly, acknowledging McGee’s statement and somehow not placing any blame at the same time. “But it wasn’t just you, McGee. You don’t have to take full responsibility.”

McGee took some consolation in having his earlier thoughts verified even as he found it weird that Tony even knew what he’d been thinking. He sighed deeply, shaking his head. This wasn’t supposed to be about making himself feel better.

McGee tried to start again. “We fucked up---the whole team. All of us.”

“Yeah, you did.”

McGee grimaced mentally. Okay…so they were in agreement on that point. He bit his lower lip, eyeing Tony uncertainly. Gibbs didn’t accept apologies but that didn’t mean Tony wouldn’t. Somehow just saying he was sorry didn’t seem like it would be enough to fix things. Judging by the look on Tony’s face, he already understood McGee was trying to apologize---even if he couldn’t actually get the words out. Tony confirmed that thought a second later.
“It’s okay, Tim. I get it.”

McGee nodded, relieved not to have to actually find the right words. He frowned. “Would it have mattered if we had handled things differently?”

“Honestly, Tim, I don’t know.” Tony shrugged. “If wishes were horses, every beggar would ride.”

“But—“

“You can’t undo what was done.” Tony shook his head. “And you guessing about all the possible outcomes will only make you nuts. It is better to focus on not making the same mistake twice.”

“I won’t.”

“Not with me, no, you won’t. But it is something to keep in mind when Gibbs gets a new probie. Or when you get a team of your own.”

McGee swallowed hard, not liking what Tony’s statement implied. Blue eyes met green. “We can’t fix it, can we?”

“If by fix you mean for things to be like they were—then no.” Tony shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t want that.”

“We do.” McGee made a sweeping hand gesture, trying to encompass more than just Abby’s lab. “All of us.”

“I know.” Tony smiled gently.

McGee breathed in sharply. “But you don’t care.”

He could hear the censure and anger in his voice. Tony stared at him. There was a hardness in his eyes that McGee remembered seeing only once before. It had scared him then, and it scared him now. He’d crossed a line and he knew it—McGee forced himself not to look away.

“You really want to go there, McGee?” Tony asked, his voice almost whisper soft, more threatening for the lack of volume and hard edge than if he’d snarled and gotten in McGee’s face.

“Do you really want to start a tit for tat kind of argument that will tell you everything you want to know about why I left?” Tony’s smile took on a hard edge. “You’ll have all the answers, but you won’t like what I have to say. And believe me, you will hate knowing as much as you hate not knowing right now. Is that really what you want, Tim?”

McGee opened his mouth, and then closed it. He wanted the specifics, all the damn details, but he was beginning to understand that there were things he was better off not knowing. Did he really want to know
exactly how large a role he’d played in Tony’s leaving? Did he really want to know just how much anger, pain and disappointment he’d caused?

Tony’s gaze softened and McGee found it easier to breathe. “Or would you rather take the opportunity to just make nice and salvage what we can from of all this so that we can be friends?”

“Friends?” McGee asked, trying not to flinch at how stupid he sounded. “You told Abby you weren’t mad at her, but you didn’t mention the rest of us. There was a lot we did and didn’t do—“

“I’m not mad at you either, McGee.” Tony looked and sounded sincere.

“But you were.”

“Yes, I was.” Tony agreed. “I had a lot to be pissed about, but I got over it.”

McGee took a breath and let it out slowly. “You’re not coming back, are you?”

Tony sighed, and looked away. “Probably not.”

“Why?” McGee stepped forward, reaching a hand out, only to stop when Tony turned away from him. “You said you aren’t mad. You don’t hate us. Why—“

“Because I made a life for myself in Houston. It’s a life I enjoy and I don’t want to give up.”

McGee blinked. He hadn’t really thought about that possibility. He studied Tony, noticing for the first time how much more relaxed and healthier he looked before leaving NCIS.

“You are happy there.”

It wasn’t a question but Tony answered anyway. “Yeah, I am.”

“You’re really happy there?”

McGee jumped, startled by Abby’s reappearance. His gaze darted back and forth between Tony and Abby, unsure of what would happen next.

“Yes, Abby, I am.”

“But we’re family.”

“I have family there too.”
“We were your family first.” Abby stamped her foot.

“Joe and I have been family from birth, Abby. I’ve known him most of my life.”

“But there’s only one of him and you’ve got me, McGee, Ziva, Ducky, Gibbs—“

“It’s not about numbers.”

McGee understood what Tony’s argument implied. LaFiamma and his squad in Houston likely gave Tony everything his old team hadn’t---trust, respect, loyalty, acceptance. Their track record would make that damned hard to compete with.

Abby stared at him. “Tony, come home, please.”

“Houston is my home now.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do.” Tony gave her an apologetic smile. “Abby, please understand, I didn’t run away from you guy…not really. I ran toward something. I don’t want to hurt your feelings…I’m sorry. Really I am, but—”

“Don’t be sorry.” Abby launched herself at him, hugging Tony fiercely. “It’s not your fault.”

No, it is our fault, McGee thought, we pushed him away. If they had done things differently, if they’d found Tony sooner, if---but none of that really mattered. They weren’t going to get a do over. Tony had already moved on. They were going to have to find a way to do the same. McGee rubbed tiredly at his forehead. He didn’t want to, but there were a lot of things he hadn’t wanted to deal with in the past few months that he’d learned to handle.

“Shh…no more tears,” Tony crooned softly to Abby. “You just cleaned your face.”

“I know.” Abby snuffled, stepping away from Tony, swiping a hand across her face. “I just---damn it, Tony,” she smacked his arm, “you better not try to disappear again.”

“I won’t.” Tony held out a hand to her, extending his pinky for her to grasp with her own. “I swear.”

“I want your e-mail address, your snail mail address, your cellphone number, you home number, the office —”

“I’ll give them to you.”

Abby nodded, accepting his promise. McGee recognized and welcomed the olive branch being offered by
Tony agreeing to give Abby ways to stay in touch. Things for the team might not be what they once were---but there was also the chance that things could be more than they had become. It wasn’t exactly what McGee had hoped for, and yet it was genuinely more than he’d expected.

“You can open my gift, Abby.” Tony nodded toward where the wrapped present resided, safely under glass on the shelf above her computer monitor. “It will not be the last one I give you. I promise.”

Abby grinned delightedly. “I’ve got something for you too.”

“You do?” Tony smiled brightly. It was his patented ‘excited little boy’ smile. McGee had forgotten how much he liked that particularly smile. He’d missed it. He’d bet anything Abby had too.

Abby nodded, skipping over to her computer, lifting the glass from where the presents had sat side by side since the day Tony had left. “I do.”

McGee understood for the first time the other present Abby had was a gift for Tony. He’d wondered about it, but had been leery of asking outright. If she wouldn’t tell Gibbs, she sure as hell wouldn’t tell him. McGee stepped closer, curious to finally know what they’d gotten each other.

Abby stripped the paper and had the small box open in record time. McGee was not terribly surprised to see Tony had gotten Abby jewelry, it was one of her favorite things to receive after all. He was stunned by the beauty of what Tony had gotten her. It was necklace; a single five point star mounted on a short chain so that it hung from two of the points. The chain was made of free form links that looped and twisted about each other in what should have been a messy and chaotic form but instead were cohesive and elegant. It suited Abby perfectly.

“Tony,” Abby breathed out softly, clearly awed, “it’s beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it?” Abby gaped at him. “I love it.”

“You’re welcome.”

McGee expected Tony to be smug, but instead he looked and sounded almost shy.

“Open yours,” Abby ordered, thrusting out her gift to him.

Tony opened it with far more care than Abby had taken with her own. Abby bounced impatiently, but didn’t try to hurry Tony along. McGee almost did, but forced himself not to say anything.

Tony grinned in obvious delight when he finally revealed Abby’s present—a crystal paperweight shaped like a football helmet. McGee could just make out Tony’s name and college number etched into the high polished glass.
“It’s perfect, Abby.”

Abby beamed.

Tony leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to give it to you sooner.”

“Better late than never.”

Tony gave McGee a look, and he knew Tony meant that for him as well. He’d accepted McGee’s apology, and while it wasn’t enough to make Tony come back, it was better than having said nothing at all. They could build on this and move forward.

McGee nodded his thanks, getting a nod in return. It wasn’t the sort of resolution he’d have written for his novels, but it was one he could live with.
"We both know I didn't kill him." Kort spoke quietly to Gibbs, his voice not carrying even the few feet away to where Ziva stood watching both of them and the rest of the hotel lobby closely.

"You really think that matters?" Gibbs kept his voice equally quiet. They didn't know exactly who had killed Rene Benoit, not for certain, but they both had their theories.

Gibbs cocked his head, eyeing Kort. McGee's information had been solid. Finding the man had simply been a matter of showing up where he was staying, confronting him in the lobby and stepping into a near by alcove for privacy. Everything should be so easy, Gibbs had thought.

Both Kort's eyebrows rose and he 'tsk'ed. "And here, all this time, I thought you were about law and order, seeing to it the guilty got punished for their misdeeds."

Gibbs resisted the urge to smack the man's sarcastic expression right off his face. He didn't want the CIA agent to know just how much having to this bothered him.

"All you have to do is say you killed him and that it was sanctioned." Gibbs kept his voice level and even. "It's not like lying is a new skill for you."

Kort snorted. "I'm not taking the fall for someone else."

"You're not going to." Gibbs shook his head. "No one is even going charge you, and you know it." Kort's status as an undercover operative for the CIA practically guaranteed his immunity. Not to mention he had literally taken over for La Grenouille.

Kort cocked his head to one side, the overhead lighting glinting dully off his balding head. "Then why should I even bother?"

Gibbs' smile was little more than a baring of his teeth. "In terms of credibility with Benoit's cronies and customers, it will help solidify your position as his successor if you lend credence to what they probably already suspect."

"Really?" Kort arched an eyebrow. "And just what is it they suspect?"

"Benoit's right hand man got tired of playing second fiddle and took him out." Gibbs knew that was already in the rumor mill from a few calls of his own he'd made after he and Tony had decided on Plan B. Fornell had likely discounted the rumors, if he'd even heard them, because of the evidence he had pointing toward Shepard or someone in her employ.

"And you always could play it up with his clients and competition as you seeing the writing on the wall...Benoit was losing his nerve, he was a liability, and it was in everyone's best interest if he was eliminated to save a very lucrative business."

There was no doubt in Gibbs' mind Kort had already started to play that angle. He would have to if he was going to do successfully maintain any sort of power base as an arms dealer.

Kort frowned. "I still don't see why I should allow myself to be taken into custody."

"What better way to add to everyone's belief you've got balls enough to take Benoit's place than to have you brought in for questioning by the agency looking into this death? The fact that nothing gets pinned on you
will only add to your image as a 'worthy successor'."

"NCIS isn't the agency investigating." Kort smirked. "Way I hear it, they are the ones under investigation."

"Fornell is there. We are assisting with the investigation."

Kort rolled his eyes. "Right."

Gibbs fixed Kort with a hard look. "You are about to be more than the power behind the throne which is something I'm sure the CIA is salivating all over. But you are far from invulnerable, Kort."

"You going to take me out, Gibbs?" Kort looked amused.

Gibbs smiled. There was no humor in it. "Doesn't have to me. It would only take one phone call, little information to the wrong people, and you could find your own car the one blowing up in downtown DC."

He still owed Kort for destroying Tony's car. Letting them all think Tony was dead wasn't something Gibbs had forgotten, or would ever forget.

Kort sobered. "You shouldn't make idle threats."

"I'm not." Gibbs' smile widened. He meant every word. It wouldn't hurt his feelings one bit to rat out Kort and let the man twist in the wind if it came right down to that.

"The Agency finally has you in the position they've likely wanted all along. If they want to keep you there, it would be best for you to do this little favor for me and not give me a reason to let any of your clients know exactly who and what you are."

"Favor?" Kort's eyes narrowed, giving Gibbs a speculative look. "Does this mean I could call in a marker."

"Within reason...That is exactly what it I am syaing." Gibbs knew it was a deal with the devil, but he didn't see a lot of options. He wasn't going to have his entire team get fucked over because Shepard didn't have brains enough to look out for herself let alone anyone else.

"Within reason? That means what exactly?"

"Not going to kill anyone for you." Gibbs had slipped from his own ethical code in the past, and survived, he could do it again, if he had to. But he had to draw a line somewhere.

"Fair enough." Kort dipped his head, accepting the one limitation.

That one caveat was hardly restrictive. The field was wide open for a lot that Kort could and probably would ask for at some future date. Gibbs knew Kort would accept nothing less.

Kort rubbed his thumb across his lower lip, giving Gibbs a thoughtful look. "You do realize that if I tell Fornell I killed Rene and that it was sanction by the agency, he will no longer be looking for the killer."

"I know." Gibbs mentally grimaced trying hard not to let his distaste show. It galled him to let Shepard get away with this, but he couldn't see any other option.

"I hope whoever you are doing this for is worth it."

Gibbs nodded once. His team was worth letting whoever killed Rene Benoit escape justice---for now. No
one on his team deserved to get caught up in Shepard's vengeance. And he'd have time to nail her ass to the wall when doing so didn't put everyone he cared about at risk.

Kort shook his head. "You are a fool."

"I've been called worse."

Kort chuckled. "About that I am sure." He held out his hands. "Would you like to cuff me, make it nicely 'official'?"

Gibbs pulled out his cuffs, securing Kort with neat efficient movements. It wasn't truly necessary, except for appearance sake. But then, if anyone was watching, appearances would matter.

"I'll call my attorney when we arrive." Kort sighed. "More for show than anything else, of course."

"Of course," Gibbs agreed giving Kort a light shove toward where Ziva waited. The attorney wouldn't know what a sham all this was because everything would be settled long before he or she arrived. But it was attention to details like that, playing out the part to the fullest even if only for an audience of one, that would keep an undercover agent like Kort alive.

It was a pity Shepard hadn't realized the need for that sort of attention to detail before she sent Tony under without adequate backup or support. It was also a damn shame she hadn't learned that vengeance was something best done alone. Gibbs didn't drag anyone in with him when he went after the killer of his wife and daughter. He did his best to keep his team out of shit that might blow up in their faces. Shepard should have looked out for those in her command, not deliberately and carelessly put them at risk.

Gibbs sighed silently. He had tried to protect his team, keeping them out of the loop with Franks and later Maddie Tyler. It hadn't worked out the way he'd hoped, but he had at least made the effort to keep them safe. In hindsight he'd have done better to simply include them. It would have been safer for everyone---Tony in particular.

He knew before his trip to Mexico and before Tony had left none of his team would have ever suspected Gibbs second guessed himself, but now he didn't think his self-doubts would surprise any of them. He wondered idly if Shepard ever thought her actions were wrong. If she ever considered how things could have been done differently. Given her reaction to the Fornell, Gibbs was certain she hadn't learned a damn thing from this fiasco. Yet another reason having to deal with Kort pissed him off.

The ride back to the office was quiet. Gibbs wanted to talk to Ziva. He wanted to ask how her conversation with Tony went, but he didn't want an audience for that conversation. He could have asked on their way to get Kort, but Gibbs was afraid she might actually tell him. His gut already told him that Ziva and Tony had ironed out whatever differences existed between them, but it wasn't enough to get Tony to agree to come back.

Gibbs would have liked to have had a moment alone with Ducky to find out how things had gone with Tony in the morgue. Gibbs didn't know for certain, but he was fairly confident there were no difference to iron out between Ducky and Tony. He couldn't see Tony having stayed in touch with the older man if there were. He hoped they'd talked about how different things had been with Tony gone, about how much they wanted him to come back, but knowing Ducky, Gibbs was sure the conversation was more about what was going on in Tony's life in Houston.

Glancing in the review mirror to look at Kort, Gibbs wondered for the first time if maybe Tony wasn't better off in Houston. At least there Tony wouldn't have to worry about sacrificing his own personal ethics. He wouldn't be forced into making deals with shady characters, suspending justice for the sake of saving people
who should never have been endangered in the first place. He wouldn't have a bastard for a boss.

Gibbs knew McGee and Abby would be talking to Tony. They would both make a concerted effort to convince Tony that coming back to NCIS was the right choice. At the moment, Gibbs couldn't decide if he wanted them to succeed or not.

Watching LaFiamma and Lundy with Tony was like watching two guard dogs on duty. For as well as his team had worked together, Gibbs had never seen them watch out for one another with so much intensity or single minded purpose. He knew he was partially to blame for that, often setting the younger agents at odds with one another, making them compete for his attention and approval. It had gotten results, and that was all he'd cared about, until he was forced to acknowledge how much it cost.

Gibbs' fingers clenched around the steering wheel, knuckles whitening. He really hated Houston. And Lundy. And LaFiamma. But mostly, he hated that Tony might well be better off there, and that Tony clearly thought the same thing.

And he really, well and truly, hated Shepard for being the final straw. They hadn't actually given Tony much reason to stay, but she'd ultimately given him a reason to leave. He wished Morrow had stayed, or had the good sense to pick a qualified replacement--someone with better sense and ability.

Gibbs sighed silently. A thorough investigation of who really killed Rene Benoit would be something he undertook on his own. It would have to wait until he was sure his team was safe from any fallout, but Gibbs would get to the bottom of what happened.

First order of business though was to get Kort to Fornell and call off the FBI's dogs. Gibbs pressed harder on the gas pedal. It was going to take hours, maybe even days, to get the bad taste out of his mouth for doing this so the sooner he was done with this mess the better.

And he wanted to make sure he had time to talk with Tony again. He had no illusions about his ability to convince the younger man to return to the team. If he was truly capable of persuading someone to stay he wouldn't have three ex-wives. Gibbs had to make sure he'd given it his best effort though, because Tony deserved that from him.

He hadn't given Tony his best in a long time. If he had, he'd have been there for Tony as a good leader, as a friend, there would have been fewer biting comments from him and their teammates. He'd have said thank you to Tony for saving his life and acknowledged just how well Tony filled the roll of Senior Agent more often. Shepard being a bitch wouldn't have had the impact it did if Tony had known how much Gibbs trusted and valued him.

He let Tony down. There was no way to truly apologize for that. The best he could do now was to try and make up for it. He hoped like hell he was up to the task.

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Jenny Shepard breathed a silent sigh of relief as Fornell and Sacks headed for the elevator. She saw no reason for Rene Benoit's death to be considered anything other than suicide. They argued otherwise, but she stood firm in her position. The man had shot himself in the head---just like her father---and they would simply have to come to terms with that fact. She smiled coldly, looking out over the bullpen from the elevated platform that led to MTAC and her office.

Her eyes narrowed as she noted Gibbs' empty desk. It had taken some quick thinking to explain how and why her gun was at the scene. She wasn't sure Gibbs would back her story that she'd given Benoit the gun to defend himself when he'd come to her house asking for sanctuary. She had given it to Benoit. He simply
hadn't taken it with him. She didn't know if Gibbs would remember that detail or not.

There was a time when she'd have known exactly which way Gibbs would jump. Ever since he'd gone to Mexico her ability to read him had diminished. It had become practically nonexistent after Tony's departure and the confrontation she'd had with Gibbs in her office.

She shifted her weight, wincing as the nearly constant pain she was in made itself known again. The drugs held the pain at bay most of the time, but they were becoming less and less effective at the current dosage. Shepard's doctor had suggested increasing the dosage again, but she'd refused. As long as she was working, she needed to stay sharp. She hated that the medication made her feel fuzzy at times and disconnected. She'd already made more mistakes than she would have before the diagnosis.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She did it again, relaxing as the pain faded again to a manageable level. She would really like nothing more than a stiff drink but she knew she wouldn't get one until leaving the office. It would be hours before she could indulge in something that worked at least as well as the damn pills.

Shepard's eyebrows rose as she saw Tony. Office gossip being what it was, she knew he was in the building, but this was the first time she'd seen him for herself. Rumor had it Gibbs went to get him from wherever it was Tony had gone. She grimaced. Not that Gibbs had deigned to say anything to her about it directly.

Fornell had mentioned he already questioned Tony. He didn't say anything directly as to the outcome of that interrogation, but Shepard could read between the lines. If he'd gotten anything out of Tony, he wouldn't have been talking to her.

She cocked her head to one side, noticing two other men walking with Tony. The dark haired one in the suit she recognized from earlier. He'd been in the observation room with Gibbs and Fornell. She'd been too distracted to ask his name or why he was there. Damn drugs, she cursed silently. That sort of information was something she should have asked for immediately.

She didn't recognize the other man. Her lips curled upward in a small smile as she wondered if he were as much a cowboy as his appearance would indicate. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a Stetson or genuine cowboy boots. They weren't exactly common in the DC area.

Shepard watched them head for the break room. Nodding to herself, she headed down the stairs. Gibbs was out. McGee and Ziva weren't at their desks either. She was sure Tony would know where they were and what they were doing. He could give her an update on what progress the team had made in getting the FBI to back off.

Shepard frowned when she heard a soft thump as she approached the break room doorway. She couldn't place the noise, but the next sound was unmistakable. It was the sound of something dropping off the shelf of the candy machine.

"That's a neat little trick."

Shepard didn't recognize that voice, but the drawl made her think it was probably the cowboy. It was cliché, but she couldn't imagine someone dressed like he stepped out of a Wrangler jean ad to not have a southern accent.

"It's not a trick. It's theft."

Even though he hadn't said anything in the observation room while she had been there, Shepard thought this
voice matched what she'd have expected the dark haired stranger to sound like. The voice had a deep resonance and a trace of a mid-western accent.

"So, you don't want me to share my ill gotten gains with you?" There was an obvious tease in that drawled question.

She heard Tony laugh as she neared the open doorway.

"Hell, no, that means he wants one of his own."

She entered the room in time to see Tony smack the candy machine. She stifled a smile when a candy bar fell in response. She wondered if he'd watched "Happy Days" as a child. It wasn't hard to imagine Henry Winkler as 'The Fonz' being an idol for Tony at some point, although, Steve McQueen in 'Bullitt' seemed more his speed.

"Hello, Tony."

Tony's shoulders tightened in response to her greeting. He turned to look at her, his expression flat and unreadable. It was unnerving. She had never known him to look like that. There was always emotion in his expression—humor, confusion, disappointment, confidence, anger...something. She hadn't really expected him to be happy to see her, not given the tenor of their last conversation, but she hadn't anticipated this total lack of animation either.

"Madame Director."

She wanted to snap at him for using that hated moniker. Even though it hadn't been used since she first took the job, he obviously remembered she didn't like it, and she resented how easily he could push a button that shouldn't even be a sore spot any more. Instead of giving into her initial feelings, she smiled, trying not to look as angry as she felt.

"You never did get that memo, did you?" She kept her voice light, trying to recapture the closeness that once existed between them.

"Not getting any memos from you these days, ma'am." His tone was just as flat as his expression. "Or anyone else at NCIS, for that matter."

Her chin came up defiantly to what she heard as a criticism. It wasn't her fault he was no longer a federal agent. He was the one who quit. She just made sure the damn paperwork got processed.

"It was your decision to leave."

He arched an eyebrow. "You didn't really leave me a lot of options, did you?"

Shepard's jaw tightened. "I believe it was you who issued the ultimatum, Tony."

"And you wouldn't give an inch." Tony smiled, but there was no warmth or humor his expression. "Never let it be said I'm not a man of my word."

She never would have thought he'd draw a line and be able to stick to it. Until then, he'd done everything she'd asked of him and more. She had badly misread him and the situation.

The two other men had moved to flank Tony, standing a little behind him to the left and right. They were acting as obvious back up; she couldn't decide if she was flattered or insulted by the clear indication they
thought of her as a threat. Tony didn't act as though he'd even noticed them. Maybe he simply trusted them enough nothing had to be said. She elected not to comment on it.

"You are looking well," she said, striving to find some sort of polite common ground. She missed the days when talking to him had been so easy.

"Thank you." He dipped his head.

The usual polite add on 'so are you' wasn't there. She found herself holding her breath wondering if her illness was apparent to him as sharp green eyes assessed her. The other agents saw her daily and she knew that constant association masked small changes. It was easy to overlook her pale complexion, excuse her irritability as a byproduct of giving up coffee, her looking a little tired as the result of the long hours. To someone not used to seeing her day in and day out, the changes might just be more obvious.

"You look tired, Jenny." Tony's voice softened.

It wasn't true sympathy or even concern, not really, but Shepard welcomed the slight change from him. She wasn't used to getting the cold shoulder from him, and it hurt more than she expected.

"It's been a long day."

"Fighting with the FBI tends to add hours to the day."

"Yes, it does."

Dealing with Fornell and Sacks had drained her energy reserves. But at least she'd managed to discredit Jeanne's testimony before having to deal with him. The only thing they really had pointing to the case being murder and not suicide was Jeanne's statement. Shepard didn't particularly care that Jeanne pointed the finger at Tony; she knew there wasn't enough evidence to convict him, but she wanted any suggestion of murder quashed. Her father never got that much consideration, she'd be damned if La Grenouille got it.

"I think dealing with the FBI would be a lot easier if you just gave them what they're looking for." The cowboy's brandy brown eyes regarded her steadily, assessing her without being hostile or judgmental.

"I don't believe we've met," Shepard said. Her tone was civil, but only just barely.

"We haven't." He lightly touched the brim of his Stetson. "Sergeant Levon Lundy. Houston PD."

Shepard frowned, eyes moving to the other man. "And you are?"

"Sergeant Joseph LaFiamma. I'm also with Houston PD."

"I wasn't aware we had any cases involving the Houston Police Department."

"Not aware that you do either," Lundy grinned. "We're just here to make sure this little dust up you got going with the FBI don't leave any marks on Tony."

She glared at him. "NCIS can take care of their own."

"Really?" LaFiamma wasn't sneering but Shepard could tell he was close to it. "Never would have guessed that from what Tony's said."

Shepard bit back the first thing that came to mind. She didn't think it would help if she somehow implied
Tony was a liar. And she really didn't want to get into what Tony might have told them. Odds were she'd lose.

"Don't matter whether or not NCIS looks out for their own or not," Lundy said, "Tony isn't one of yours any more. He's one of ours. We make it a priority to look out for kith and kin."

Shepard blinked, her gaze moving back to Tony. She should have made the connection sooner. "You went to Houston PD?"

That had to be the last place she'd have thought he'd go to. For all his job jumping, Tony hadn't strayed far from the same basic geographic area. What the hell could there have been for him in Houston of all places?

"I wanted a change of pace." He shrugged. "And it's warmer there."

LaFiamma snorted and muttered quietly. "More than just the weather that's warmer."

Shepard's arched an eyebrow, giving him a haughty look. "Are you implying""

"Hell, no." LaFiamma's blue eyes were icy. "I'm coming right out and saying it, Lady. This fucked up little piss ant agency and most of the assholes who work here are stone cold rat bastards!"

"Joe."

Shepard wasn't sure what surprised her more---that it wasn't Tony who made that one word protest silencing the other man, or that it only took one word to stop what was clearly just the opening gambit of one hell of a tirade. Lundy and LaFiamma traded a look Shepard couldn't even begin to decipher. Tony seemed more amused than anything else.

"You'll have to forgive, Joe, ma'am." Lundy smiled tightly at LaFiamma before adopting a put upon expression. "He's got trouble not calling a spade a spade, but I've been working on him."

"Pot and kettle." Tony snickered, rolling his eyes. "Both of you are about as subtle as a couple of sledgehammers."

"Whatever works, Tony," Joe said, not sounding at all repentant. "And Cowboy, it was you who told me honesty is the best policy. Don't be getting all bent out of shape when I actually take your advice."

Lundy smirked. "Also told you there was a time and a place for it. I think you quit listening when I got to the part you didn't want to hear."

The lighthearted banter reminded her of how Gibbs' team used to be before Tony left. They rarely joked or teased one another these days. Tony had evidently taken the good humor and fun with him when he went. Initially, Shepard had thought it would make the team work better, but in reality, they were less of a team without it. Gibbs was still the boss, McGee and Ziva were still excellent investigators, Abby and Ducky were still capable support for them. They closed cases and solved crimes, but they weren't a team or even almost family the way they'd once been. Without Tony, they were just people who worked together.

"Was there something specific you wanted to speak to me about, Director Shepard?" Tony asked.

Shepard hesitated for a moment, considering her options. There were a lot of things she'd like to talk to him about, but she didn't want an audience for them. The protective stance Lundy and LaFiamma had taken made Shepard certain she wouldn't get time alone with Tony.
She sighed silently. Apologies were a sign of weakness, and in all honesty she wasn't sorry for anything. She would have liked to have parted with Tony on better terms; she would have preferred not to have Gibbs openly hostile and his team suspicious of her every move; she would like it if the FBI would simply go away, but there wasn't anything she'd have done differently. Taking care of La Grenouille had been an ambition she had for most of her adult life. Getting it done before her illness made it impossible for her to do much of anything at all was something she was proud of.

She opted for the main reason she'd bothered coming down the stairs. "Do you know where Gibbs went?"

"He didn't say anything to me about where he was going, Ma'am."

He didn't look away; he didn't even blink, but she knew he was lying. Oh Gibbs might not have said anything directly to Tony, but he had to have some idea of where the former Marine had gone.

"What about Ziva and McGee?"

"I'm not on their team anymore." Tony shrugged. "It's not my job to watch them."

There was no pain or regret in his face or his voice. It was a simple statement of fact. Even though it had been months, Shepard half expected Gibbs to have already offered Tony his old job back and for him to have accepted.

She'd never considered he'd be so comfortable with not being on the team any longer. Shepard had been so sure he didn't have anything else in his life except his teammates and the job. Losing both should have made him as eager to return as it had Gibbs. Of course, Gibbs hadn't gotten a new job, or new teammates. Gibbs hadn't found a new purpose or made a new place for himself. And as he'd told her the last time they'd spoken...Tony wasn't Gibbs.

"I'm not working the case. I'm just killing time waiting for Fornell to finally come to his senses and tell me I'm not a suspect any more." Tony held up the candy bar he'd purloined from the vending machine. "You want one?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you." Shepard half turned toward the door. "It was good to see you again, Tony."

He nodded, but didn't return the sentiment. As she walked away, she heard him say quietly, ‘good-bye Jenny’. There was such an air of finality about it, Shepard shivered, struck by an unaccountable feeling of loss that hit her.

She took a deep breath and headed back up the stairs to her office. Shepard never wasted time second guessing herself or regretting things she'd done before, she wasn't going to start now. Things hadn't turned out quite as well as she'd hoped for. A few people had been burned along the way, possibly herself included if Fornell had his way, but in the end, she'd achieved her objective. Nothing else mattered.

end part 28
Tony hadn’t been surprised that Kort could not only claim killing Rene Benoit had been sanctioned, he was also able to produce a signed document to that effect. The man had gotten authorization to take out a federal agent in downtown DC after all. It couldn’t have been all that easy to convince his superiors to engage in what amounted to an act of domestic terrorism, so Kort was clearly a persuasive bastard.

Tony had taken advantage of Kort’s lack of attention as he stepped off the elevator to belt him one. He put enough strength in that blow to send Kort reeling back with a split lip.

“That’s for blowing up my car, you asshole.”

Tony hit him a second time, a blow that was sure to give the man a black eye. “And that’s for trying to kill Jeanne.”

Tony wasn’t terribly upset over the fact that he could have just as easily died in the explosion as Jeanne had they been in his car going out for breakfast as they usually did. He was a federal agent. He’d put his life on the line more times than he could count. It had angered him more that his team hadn’t seemed to give his ‘demise’ the same sort of consideration they had when Kate was killed, or even Pacci for that matter. But he’d had time to come to terms with that, more or less.

But Jeanne hadn’t signed up for being a target. She was just an innocent bystander. She hadn’t known anything about her father’s business or his desire to quit. Her being a means to an end, a pawn on the chessboard, for both Shepard and Kort still pissed off Tony.

Tony raised his fist again ready to strike Kort once more. Kort’s hands came up as he assumed a defensive crouch. The sound of the elevator’s soft ‘ping’ announcing another arrival and Shepard calling ‘DiNozzo’ made Tony hesitate.

He hadn’t planned on having an audience other than Joe and Levon. They understood his anger. Joe, in large part, even shared it. He had wanted to shoot Kort on general principle when he found out who he was and what he’d done. It had taken no small amount of Tony’s own persuasive power to convince Joe to let him handle Kort in his own way. They still needed the man alive to claim responsibility for Rene Benoit’s death. It was the only way to get the FBI to back off and spare Tony’s old team from further trouble. That didn’t mean Tony couldn’t smack him around a little though.

Kort shot Shepard a dirty look as she stepped out of the elevator. “You should control your boy better.”

“Not her boy any more,” Levon drawled quietly, from where he’d lounged against the wall. He pose would look casual to anyone who didn’t know him better. But his right hand was within easy reach of his gun and his brown eyes coldly assessed everything around him.

“CIA is as slow on the up take as the FBI.” Joe shook his head, clucking his tongue. “And we rely on these people to keep us safe.”

Joe held a butterfly knife in one hand. He was flipping it open and closed in a way that was anything but
casual. The blade flashed brightly, reflecting the overhead lighting, before Joe made it disappear in a neat slight of hand Tony had long ago given up any hope of mastering.

Kort eyed both Joe and Levon warily. “I don’t know either of you.”

“No, you don’t. And for that you should be grateful.” Joe smiled tightly. “Had we met before now, you’d already be dead.”

Tony knew it wasn’t an idle statement. Joe wasn’t exactly a cold blooded killer, but he took attacks on his family personally. He was prone to respond with equal force and violence. It was one of the reasons Tony didn’t make a habit of fully disclosing everything that went on to Joe—-it was safer for everyone if he didn’t.

“Since you did what was asked of you, we don’t have to bury you in a shallow grave in the desert somewhere.” Levon touched the brim of his Stetson. “Course, that’s subject to change if you come anywhere near Tony again.” Joe wasn’t the only one who took attacks on his family personally.

Shepard stepped further into the hall, glaring at Tony, Joe, and Levon. “Gentleman, I don’t approve of this sort of—”

“All due respect, Ma’am, no one here gives a shit about what you approve of.” Levon’s grin was positively feral. From Joe, it wouldn’t have surprised Tony, but Levon was usually more deferential around woman. That aspect of his nature was probably part of the reason he’d called Joe off when they’d met Shepard in the break room.

Levon’s gaze hardened as he made eye contact with her and held it. “This little tête-à-tête isn’t any of your business.”

“Threatening to murder someone in a federal agency most certainly is my business.”

“You really want to get into a pissing contest over whether or not you have the moral high ground?” Joe asked, drawing her attention to him, his cold blue eyes regarding her steadily.

Shepard’s chin came up. Tony sighed, shaking his head. She had no sense at all to challenge Joe when it was so obvious he wouldn’t back down, but then she didn’t really know him.

“The way I hear it, a suspect was killed right here the elevator. Managed to absolve the perpetrator without even breaking a sweat, didn’t you?” Joe arched an eyebrow. “But then that was outright murder and not just a threat so maybe you didn’t feel as inclined to make it your business.”

Shepard’s jaw tightened. “That was an accident.”

“Right.” Joe snorted. “Have a lot of those sorts around here, don’t you?”

“Excuse me?”
“There was another suspect who got shot dead in a bar by an agent who doesn’t even work here any more. Hardly ruffled any feathers over that one at all while you swept it under the rug.”

Joe looked pointedly at Kort. “Then there is the whole reason Mr. Secret Agent Man is here. Thinking Fornell might just want to know—”

“You’ve made your point.” Shepard hissed.

“Good.” Joe nodded sharply once. “Then you can go on about whatever you were doing before getting sidetracked by what doesn’t concern you.”

She glared at him. Tony traded a look with Levon, both of them rolling their eyes. Joe hadn’t backed down from a hardened mob boss, a professional assassin, a stalker or a strung out junkie with a gun in his face. She wasn’t going to cow him.

“I’m still in charge here, Sergeant LaFiamma.”

“Of NCIS, that’s true,” Levon pointed out calmly before Joe could respond, “but you have no authority over of us, Ma’am. Secret Agent Man here included.”

Tony was mildly surprised to find Kort looking just a bit smug over being lumped in with them. He obviously had no affection for Shepard. It made sense he’d be more than a little pissed at her, Tony mused to himself; she had messed up a long running case for Kort and Gibbs coerced him into confessing to a murder he hadn’t committed because of her.

Shepard snapped at them, “I want you out of my building.”

Tony half expected her to stamp her foot too.

“As soon as the FBI says Tony isn’t a suspect any longer and he’s free to go, we’ll leave. Not one damn minute before.”

Shepard waved a hand toward Kort. “He has seen to that.”

“I believe they are already aware of what I have done, Director Shepard.” Kort wiped the blood from his chin with the back of one hand.

He made eye contact with Tony. “It wasn’t personal.”

“Not for you, no.” Tony’s eyes narrowed. “It would be best if we never saw each other again, ever.”

Kort nodded. “I’ll be leaving now.”
He gave Joe and Levon as wide a berth as the hallway would allow for as he moved past them. Tony was amused by his display of caution. But then, he didn’t know he had nothing to fear from either man—at least not in a building where most of the hallways had video cameras. Neither Joe nor Levon were stupid enough to do anything that might be taped and used against them later. Tony had felt free to hit Kort because he knew no one at NCIS would seriously challenge him on getting in a few payback blows. Everyone knew Kort had blown up Tony’s car, and before long, everyone would also think he was responsible for Gibbs’ team being investigated by the FBI. Shame they couldn’t know the full truth.

Tony sighed softly. He was honestly glad he no longer had to worry about secrets much. He didn’t have to lie in Houston to keep people he cared about safe. He could be honest there. And he didn’t have to be like Kort, prepared to kill innocent bystanders or fellow cops, for the sake of a case no one was supposed to ever know about. He didn’t have to be like Gibbs and make a deal with the devil so that fellow teammates wouldn’t end up tainted by things beyond their control.

Shepard stalked past him. Tony smirked watching her leave. He didn’t have to be like her either, so warped by a desire for vengeance that everything else in life became insignificant.

Houston wasn’t perfect by any means, but it was better in a lot of ways. Coming back to DC had shown him a lot of what he missed, but more importantly, it had shown him why leaving had been a good choice.

The elevator’s soft ding broke Tony’s reverie. He turned to watch the doors open, blinking in surprise when he saw Jeanne standing inside the car. Joe had told him Fornell agreed to keep her in the building for awhile, that Tony would have a chance to speak to her if he wanted, but he wasn’t expecting to just meet her in the elevator. He hadn’t even been sure if he should talk to her or if he even wanted to at all.

Tony took some comfort from the fact that Jeanne looked almost as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

“Tony?”

“Hello, Jeanne.”

She was just as beautiful as he remembered. Her dark hair was lighter, and her skin darker than the last time he’d laid eyes on her, suggesting she’s spent a lot of time in the sun recently. He supposed that only made sense; Fornell said she’d been in Africa.

He was vaguely aware of Joe and Levon stepping back, giving them the illusion of privacy. He’d have to thank them later.

Tony fidgeted nervously as he and Jeanne simply looked at one another. He’d wanted to apologize, but somehow ‘I’m sorry’ just didn’t seem like it would be enough. He forced himself to look her in the eye.

“I don’t really know what to say.”
She bit her lower lip, expression pensive. “Just tell me one thing?”

Tony nodded. He could do that.

“Was anything between us real? Any of it?”

Tony swallowed hard. It would be easier to lie, to tell her that none of it had been real. Lying might be better for her, provide some sort of closure, but he didn’t want to lie any more. He’d never really wanted to lie to her. She deserved the truth.

“A lot more was real than wasn’t.” He took a breath. “There was more truth than lie to most of what happened between us.”

She might not believe him, but it didn’t matter—he meant what he said. He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “I never intended to hurt you.”

Her eyes were overly bright with unshed tears. “You did anyway.”

“I know.” He resisted the urge to reach out and touch her, unsure of how she’d react. “And for that, I am genuinely sorry.”

She glared at him, fists curling at her sides. “You got my father killed.”

Tony shook his head, denying her claim. “Did you know that when my car blew up, you were the target, not me?”

She stared at him, mouth open. Obviously, no one had bothered to mention that little detail, not even her father the last time he’d talked to her. “What? Why?”

“Because your father wanted to quit.” Tony sighed. He’d been sure Rene would have told her that much, but maybe he’d glossed over things thinking he’d have time to tell her everything later. “He didn’t want to sell weapons any more. And some people out there weren’t ready for him to retire. Killing you was going to be a message to him, and even though they failed, just the attempt was pretty convincing.”

“When that didn’t work, they went after him?” She asked, although it was more of a statement than a question.

Tony didn’t want to lie to her, but telling the whole truth wasn’t an option either. He elected to avoid her question. “I’m not part of the investigation.”

“Why not?” She frowned. “You were only dating me to get close to him. Shouldn’t you be--”

“You told the FBI I killed him, Jeanne.” He kept his voice gentle. He understood her reasons better now—he didn’t agree with her actions, but he understood. “I was a suspect which means I couldn’t truly
participate in the investigation.”

“But I told them I lied.” She looked at him beseeingly. “Surely you could be part of it now. You could
prove he didn’t commit suicide.”

Tony was bemused by her display of faith. She tried to frame him for murder, but still thought he could find
her father’s killer. She still thought he’d be willing to. Even if he could, it would mean putting his old
team’s welfare last, and he wasn’t prepared to do that. For as much as he had loved her, he still cared more
about them than he did about Jeanne; especially now in light of her having accusing him of murder.

Even though he understood her motives, he wasn’t certain he could forgive her for how she opted to get
revenge on him. He’d broken her heart, and as awful as that was, it still wasn’t grounds for sending him to
prison for life. She could have been like the other women scorned in his life---egged his car, put his name
on a herpes web site, or just sent him hate mail. Those things were vindictive and decidedly unpleasant, but
ultimately he’d found them excusable.

“I can’t help you, Jeanne.”

“Can’t or won’t?” She challenged.

“I’m not a federal agent any more.”

Her eyes widened. “They fired you?”

“I quit.” He shrugged one shoulder. “I haven’t been with NCIS for more than four months.”

Her jaw tightened. He couldn’t say if she was upset with not knowing he didn’t work for NCIS, that no one
had mentioned it to her before now, or if she was simply angry that he was no longer in a position to find out
what happened to her father.

“I am sorry, Jeanne.”

She studied him, blue eyes measuring him slowly. He didn’t know exactly what she was looking for, or if
she believed him or not, but she nodded again.

“I never want to see you again.”

Tony tried not to let it show how much her declaration hurt. He just nodded, letting her walk out of his life,
hoping that she would eventually come to terms with whatever story the FBI ended up spinning about her
father’s death. He hoped she’d eventually find happiness too.

Joe and Levon made their way back to him. Concern was readily apparent in their expressions.

“You okay, Tony?” Joe asked quietly.
“Not really, no.”

Joe pulled him into a hug. Tony hugged him back, taking in all the warmth and affection his cousin had to offer. He felt Levon’s hand on his shoulder, a mute offer of even more support. ‘Thank you’ wasn’t nearly enough to cover how grateful he was to them for everything they’d done, for everything they were willing to keep doing, but Tony said it anyway. Joe just hugged him harder and Levon quietly murmured ‘you’re welcome’.

“When can we go home?” Tony asked, stifling any embarrassment he felt at how plaintive he sounded.

“Whenever you’re ready to leave.”

Tony pulled away from Joe, wiping at his eyes relieved to find them still dry. He hadn’t cried in years; he had no intention of starting now. Tony squared his shoulders.

“I just need to say good-bye to everyone.” This time, he didn’t want any regrets over how he left. He had enough regrets already. There was no need to add any more.
Tony wasn’t sure if they’d planned it, if it was by accident, or a byproduct of their normal work routine, but he was grateful that he could speak to each of his former coworkers alone. He hadn’t wanted some big, group good-bye that would ultimately be a meaningless show. He wanted his parting from them to be personal and private.

He found Abby in her lab. Saying good-bye to her was surprisingly painless. There were no tears, for which Tony was decidedly grateful. There were several hugs, one or two of which made breathing momentarily difficult but Tony still enjoyed them. And there was more than one repetition of all his contact information.

Abby now had in her possession every possible means of contacting him known to man---and probably a few unknown. Tony knew she has some strange beliefs, but he trusted that she wouldn’t do anything to hurt him, so he didn’t baulk at giving her a clipping of his hair when she asked for it. He wouldn’t put it past her to put some sort of voodoo mojo something or other on him. If it made her feel better, he didn’t mind. And knowing she cared enough to bother made him feel better. It was a win/win he could live with.

McGee, Tony found loitering in the hallway just outside Abby’s lab. It was obvious he’d been trying to give Tony and Abby a moment alone. It was equally obvious he didn’t want to miss a chance to have his own moment alone with Tony.

Saying good-bye to McGee was almost abrupt in comparison to Abby’s. A handshake, a pat on the shoulder and they were good. Tony promised to stay in touch and meant it.

He had McGee’s cell phone and work number; neither one had changed. Tony even had his e-mail address, both work and personal. After McGee’s revelation about his online gaming Tony had indulged his curiosity, researching what and where McGee played. Figuring out his username and ID had been a piece of cake. Tony hadn’t done anything with that knowledge, but now he just might have a good reason to put it to use. It would be nice to surprise McGee by showing up in his game when he was online. Tony had gotten reasonably good at it before abandoning it once his curiosity had been satisfied. It would be fun to see if he could keep McGee on his toes in cyberspace.

Saying good-bye to Ducky required a stop in the morgue. It was strange, given how autopsies and mutilated bodies still made him uncomfortable, but the NCIS morgue had been one of Tony’s favorite places in the building. Ducky always made it seem like more than just a repository for the dead.

Ducky had smiled when Tony walked in. His kind blue eyes were alight with understanding. He knew why Tony was there without having to ask. He held out his hand for Tony to shake. Tony took it without hesitation.

“Now that a few fences have been mended, my dear boy, I expect you’ll be a bit freer with your communication in the future.”

It wasn’t exactly a question, but Tony answered it as one anyway. “I’ll try to do more than just send an e-mail once in a while, Ducky.” He had wanted to do more than that, but hadn’t wanted to put Ducky in any more of an awkward position than he already had.
Ducky nodded. “You know the number, Anthony, call any time you like.”

“I won’t bother you at work.” Tony was quick to assure the older man. He knew Ducky took his work seriously and needed to be able to concentrate. Not to mention the fact that while personal calls at the office weren’t forbidden but they were frowned upon…at least by Gibbs.

“You do have my home phone number,” Ducky pointed out with a gentle smile.

“I’ll try to call too late. I don’t want to disturb Mrs. Mallard and I know she goes to bed early.”

“Not to worry, Anthony, if she asks, I’ll simply tell my mother it’s the Italian gigolo furniture mover she was so fond of. She’ll understand.”

Tony laughed, and pulled Ducky into a quick hug. “Thank you, Ducky. For everything.”

“You are welcome, Anthony.”

Leaving the morgue, Tony headed back up to the bullpen. He eyed the observation platform that lead to MTAC and the Director’s office and was relieved to see it empty. There wasn’t anything left for him to say to Shepard. She’d messed up his life, but in some ways she’d done him a favor at the same time. Going to Houston had been very good for him; it was the best decision he could have made. Tony supposed finding a way to let her get away with murder made them even. Although he was sure Gibbs would keep looking for away to make her pay for killing Rene Benoit---if for no other reason than the trouble she’d caused his team.

Tony wished Gibbs the best of luck with that, but it didn’t matter much to him. Making Shepard pay wouldn’t change anything for Tony, not really. Rene would still be dead, Jeanne would still hate him, and there was no real career for him at NCIS any more. His future was in Houston.

Tony sighed silently, shifting his gaze to the bullpen. He wasn’t surprised to find Ziva at her desk. She faced him as she got her feet. Her expression was calm, but her eyes were not. It never ceased to amaze Tony just how turbulent and passionate her eyes could be while so little of it ever showed anywhere else.

“You are going back to Houston?”

“I am.”

Tony hesitated. He didn’t want to shake her hand the way he had McGee’s. Some how a handshake wasn’t going to be enough, but he wasn’t sure she’d welcome a hug the way Abby and Ducky had. Finally, Tony just ruffled her hair, making her smile before he placed a quick kiss on her cheek.

“Be well, Ziva.”
“Shalom, Tony.”

When he turned to walk away, she grabbed his right arm. “You are welcome to write…or call…e-mail if you prefer. I would not mind if you stayed in touch.”

“I’d like that.” Tony smiled, his left hand rose to cover hers and squeezed once. “Abby has all my contact information. Feel free to ask her for it.”

Ziva smiled. Her relief was nearly tangible. “I will.”

Tony nodded, letting go. Maybe they could forge a genuine friendship now. He hoped so. For all their differences, he liked her.

Tony headed for the elevator. He wasn’t sure where to find Gibbs. He hadn’t seen the man since he’d brought Kort in. Tony bit his lower lip nervously. He didn’t want to leave without saying good-bye to Gibbs. He hadn’t minded doing it before---then it was a way of making a point, but now he wanted the chance to do it right. As he waited for the elevator Tony debated whether or not he should just call Gibbs’ cell, or waste time searching the building in vain hopes of finding him.

He sighed softly. Maybe Gibbs didn’t want to talk to him. The man hadn’t said any good-byes of his own. It was possible he dreaded hearing them as much as he avoided saying them.

As the doors to the elevator opened, Tony blinked in surprise to find Gibbs inside. Tony shook his head. He should have known. The elevator was Gibbs’ preferred private meeting place after all. Tony smirked when he realized Gibbs had probably been loitering in the elevator much the same way McGee had hovered in the hallway outside of Abby’s lab.

“You been hanging out here long?”

“Couple of minutes.” Gibbs shrugged and looked just a bit sheepish. It made Tony feel warm inside to know Gibbs had made a point of making a claim on the elevator just to be able to talk to him, probably scaring the hell out of everyone in the building while he was at it. That would explain why for as busy at the building was no one else was on the elevator with Gibbs, and they weren’t anxiously waiting around to get on either.

Gibbs looked around Tony, eyebrows rising. “What happened to your guard dogs?”

Tony chuckled, amused by the description knowing Joe and Levon would not only agree but probably approve. “They are waiting downstairs.”

It had taking a bit of doing to convince them that he could do this on his own. Tony knew Joe and Levon weren’t worried about his coworkers reactions; they might have been ‘guard dogs’ initially, but they no longer thought anyone at NCIS meant to harm Tony physically or emotionally. They had simply wanted to be close by to support Tony in what was likely to be a bittersweet parting. He appreciated their support, and was grateful they were willing to respect his wishes.
Gibbs stepped back, mutely inviting Tony to join him in the elevator. Tony stepped inside. He waited for Gibbs to hit the first floor button and then for him to pull the emergency stop once the elevator was in motion.

Tony watched as Gibbs seemed to struggle with what to say. It was only the second time in the years he’d known the man he’d seen him have to work at finding the right words. Tony shook his head. He wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“You don’t have to go back to Houston,” Gibbs said finally.

“No, I don’t have to,” Tony agreed.

The FBI no longer breathing down his neck; for better or worse, the La Grenouille case was finished as far as Tony was concerned. And as Ducky had put it earlier, ‘fences had been mended’. Tony could get his job back at NCIS. It wouldn’t be that hard. There was still a spot available on Gibbs’ team, one he knew he could have just by asking for it. Not even Shepard would deny him that regardless of how pissed she might be over the way things worked out. Technically, she owed him, and they both knew it.

“I want to go back,” Tony said softly. There was more for him in Houston than had ever been in DC. He wasn’t so big a fool he’d pass that up. Not after he’d spent most of his adult life looking for it.

Blue eyes searched green. “You’re sure?”

Tony didn’t hesitate to answer. “Positive.”

Gibbs cleared his throat. “You won’t reconsider?”

“I’ve already thought about it a lot.” Tony shrugged one shoulder. “It’s better if I go.”

“Better for who?”

“Me.” Tony smiled ruefully. “It’s selfish, I know, but I’ve gotten used to putting myself first when it comes to my own life.”

Gibbs smiled. “Not necessarily a bad thing.”

“Not really, no.”

Gibbs reached out a hand; instead of the head smack Tony expected, Gibbs gently cupped his face. “I never said it before, and I should have. Before I miss out on another chance…I am proud to know you, Tony DiNozzo. And I am very proud of you.”

Tony stared at Gibbs. He had never expected to hear Gibbs stay anything like that. And he never expected
to have them mean so much.

“Thanks, Boss.”

Tony impulsively pulled Gibbs into a hug. The only other time he’d hugged Gibbs has been after he thought the older man had died in an explosion. Gibbs had tolerated the contact then, not returning the gesture, but this time he wrapped his arms around Tony hugging him back.

“You make sure they look after you,” Gibbs said as he released Tony, pulling back to look him in the eye. His tone made it sound like an order.

Tony chuckled. “Don’t really think you need to worry about that.”


“I will be careful. And I’ll make sure I’ve always got back up. I promise.”

Gibbs nodded, satisfied. “Good boy.”

Gibbs hit the emergency button putting the elevator in motion again.

“I hear the gulf is a nice place to sail,” Tony tossed out casually, not looking at Gibbs.

Gibbs gave him a slant eyed look. “I’ve heard that too,”

“Never tried it myself, but you might want to give it a go if you ever get that boat out of your basement.”

“You think so, do you?” The question didn’t have any of Gibbs’ usual sarcasm.

Tony just smiled and shrugged. “By the time you get around to it, I might even have a spare room you could use when you need a break from being on the water.”

It was as close to an outright invitation to come visit as Tony could bring himself to make, unwilling to risk total rejection. The only time Gibbs had taken time off, in all the years Tony had known him, was his four month stint in Mexico. Tony tried to brace himself for whatever brush off Gibbs would likely make. He told himself it didn’t matter. It was enough that Gibbs had said he was proud of him.

Gibbs turned his head to look directly at Tony. “When you get a place of your own, give me a call. And you better have a real bed for me to use, DiNozzo, because I’m too damn old to be sleeping on that ratty couch you had.”

Tony grinned, a sudden rush of happiness making him feel almost lightheaded. Feeling more confident he couldn’t resist teasing Gibbs a little. “You slept under the boat, Gibbs, my couch is way better than that.”
Gibbs smiled at him. He raised his hand to very lightly cuff the back of Tony’s head. It was more of a caress than a slap. “A real bed, DiNozzo.”

“Got it, Boss.”

The elevator stopped and the doors opened on the first floor. Joe and Levon were waiting, leaning against the wall in front of the elevator. Levon was sipping from a cup of coffee; Joe was playing with an empty bottle that had probably held his favorite flavored water at some point. They both stood straight, shoulders square as Tony and Gibbs stepped off the elevator.

“Everything go okay, Slick?”

“Fine.”

Brown eyes and turquoise assessed him. They nodded at the same time, assured that Tony had told them the truth. What they would do if things hadn’t gone well upstairs with his old team or with Gibbs standing beside him, Tony wasn’t quite sure, he was just glad he didn’t have to find out.

“We good to go then?” Joe asked

“Yeah, we’re good.” Tony nodded. He held out his hand to Gibbs. Gibbs took it, his grip firm.

“Take care of yourself, Gibbs.”

“I will.” Gibbs smiled. “You do the same.”

Tony smiled and nodded.

“Gibbs,” Joe said by way of a good-bye, giving the former Marine a two finger salute.

“LaFiamma.”

Levon lightly patted Gibbs’ shoulder. “Next time you come visit, call first. Someone will get you at the airport.”

Gibbs frowned. “Who said I would—“

“You will.” Levon grinned, confident without being smug.

Tony had no idea how Levon would know Gibbs had even agreed to come to Houston again. He’d known Tony long enough to know he’d at least make an effort to ask, but Levon didn’t know Gibbs well enough to be so confident of his acceptance of the invitation. But then, Levon had always been a decidedly good
“We might just break out the good china for dinner.” Levon chuckled, winking at Gibbs.

Joe laughed, bumping Levon’s shoulder with his own. “Paper and plastic worked well enough, Cowboy.”

Levon snorted, bumping Joe back. “Asshole.”

Gibbs eyed both of them. “Some day you’ll have to tell me what the hell that’s about.”

“You come visit, and we just might.”

Tony wasn’t sure if that was added incentive or not, but he wouldn’t be surprised if Gibbs made a point of asking when he came to Houston the next time. The man didn’t like unsolved mysteries.

“See if you can’t get the others to come with you,” Levon said.

Gibbs arched an eyebrow. “They’d be welcome?”

“Wouldn’t have offered if they weren’t.”

Gibbs shook his head. “I will never understand you.”

“Long as you understand you owe me one, you’re fine.” Levon grinned. Gibbs rolled his eyes but didn’t argue.

Tony snickered. Joe was right. Everyone ended up owing Levon.

Joe looked at Tony. “You ready to go?”

“I’m ready.” Tony was more than ready to go home. He nodded to Gibbs, getting a nod in return. Tony walked out with Joe and Levon, feeling no need to look back.

“You okay?” Joe asked, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulder.

“I’m good.” Tony smiled, realizing just how much he meant that. This time he was leaving with no regrets, with no pain or feeling of loss. His old teammates could and would be part of his future, but NCIS was his past. His life was in Houston now and he was eager to get back to it.
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